

The BOY
VIGILANTES
of BELGIUM



GEORGE ETHELBERT WALSH



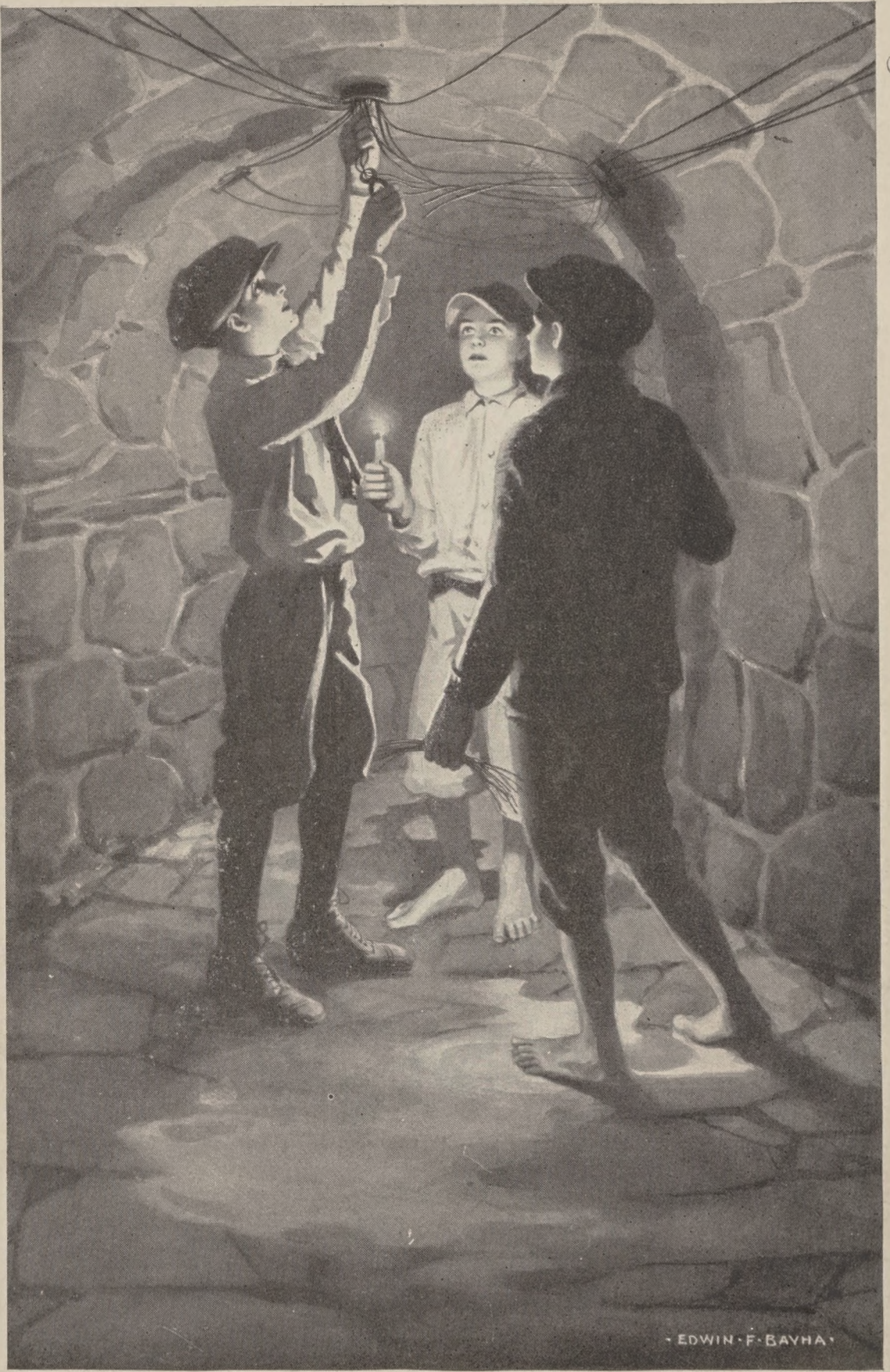
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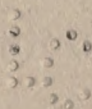


Bob clipped the wires where they were exposed

THE BOY VIGILANTES OF BELGIUM

BY
GEORGE ETHELBERT WALSH

ILLUSTRATED BY
EDWIN F. BAYHA.

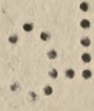


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THE BOY VIGILANTES
OF BELGIUM

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CHAPTER I

EGMONT'S ADVENTURE

ON the wooded hillside just outside the city of Brussels, two boys, ragged of clothes and swarthy of complexion, but rather too thin for rugged health, were resting in the shade of a tree, with apparently no other purpose in view than to enjoy the fresh air and sunshine while they gave their limbs and bodies a much needed vacation. Below, at the foot of the hill, paced a German sentry, and beyond gleamed a row of barracks, over which the black double-eagle of Germany fluttered idly in the breeze.

"Listen, Henri," the elder of the two boys was saying in a low, but eager voice; "good news I bring to-day. The Americans are coming—com-

ing like the locusts in the harvest season. Thousands and thousands of them! Soon there will be a great army, and the *Boches* will be rolled back to the Rhine. They don't want to believe it. Their commanders tell them it is a lie. They invent all sorts of tales, but it is true. Carl knows, and he wishes the good news passed on. Spread it through Ghent. Tell every one, and flaunt it in the faces of the *Boches*. It will make them angry—but it will make them afraid."

Egmont stopped for breath, and Henri, who had been listening eagerly, spoke. In spite of the enthusiasm awakened in him by his friend, there was a note of depression and discouragement in his voice.

"America is a long way off, Egmont. Do you think they can get here in time?"

"Have n't I just told you they're coming—that they are here, thousands of them?" exclaimed Egmont, with a slight trace of irritation.

"Yes, but it will take so many of them! When the English came, we thought Belgium would be saved. *They* came by the thousands and thousands, and our hope was great, but they had to

fall back. Nothing could stop the Huns. I fear—”

Egmont caught the speaker by the arm and shook him roughly. “Stop!” he commanded vigorously. “Don’t say that! Remember your oath. *‘I shall fear nothing, but brave everything, until my beloved country is freed of the tyrants.’* If you doubt and fear now, Henri, what can you expect the others to do? How can we keep up their courage while our soldiers are fighting in the trenches, and giving up their lives for us? I’m ashamed of you, Henri! What would our dear king and queen think if they heard you! Are n’t they giving up everything, working unafraid, night and day, for Belgium? Then why should you—”

“Don’t speak so harshly, Egmont,” interrupted Henri. “I have traveled far to-day and the sun is hot. I felt discouraged, but I am not really afraid.”

“What did you have for breakfast, Henri?” asked his companion, looking at him with sudden compassion.

“Nothing but a piece of bread—American

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bread. It did not last long. I was hungry when it was gone. On my way here I caught a fish, and made a fire to cook it. The odor of it made me ravenous. Then—then—” his eyes filled with tears of rage,—“they took it away from me, and ate it while I looked on.”

“The *Boches*?”

“Yes, a fat pig of an officer! He saw my smoke, and came just in time to take the fish almost out my mouth. Oh, Egmont, I could have killed him!”

Egmont nodded, and drew something from his blouse. “This will make you forget it,” he said quietly, handing Henri a piece of bread with a tiny chunk of meat on it. “I saved it for you. I thought you would be hungry.”

Henri’s eyes opened in greedy surprise, but almost instantly he checked the expression, and nodded his head stubbornly. “No, it’s part of your breakfast. I shall not take it.”

Egmont smiled. “I have eaten all I need,” he replied. “I had a wonderful breakfast. This is not a part of it. I don’t need it. If you won’t

take it, I'll throw it away. Even the birds are hungry, and they will eat it up quickly. Shall I show you?"

Henri snatched the bread and meat from his hands. "No, no!" he said sharply. "The birds are better off than we are. I shall eat it."

Egmont watched silently the quick disappearance of the food he had saved from his own meagre fare. A gnawing at his stomach made him wince, and unconsciously, when one of the crumbs fell on the ground, he picked it up and put it in his mouth. Fortunately Henri did not notice it. When the last mouthful had been swallowed, he sighed with satisfaction.

"It was hunger, Egmont, nothing else," he said, smiling. "I shall feel better now. I shall go back and tell the good news. Ah, we shall beat the Huns yet! We shall never give in! *Vive la Belgique!*"

"Sh-h!" cautioned Egmont. "You will be heard. That sentry down there is keeping an eye on us. We must part soon."

Henri lapsed into silence, throwing himself on

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his back, his hands supporting his head, and a bare foot elevated skyward as one leg crossed the other.

"I 'd like to shout it in their ears until it made them tremble," he growled. "Some day they will hear it in Germany."

"So they shall. When the Americans come by the millions, we shall cross the Rhine, and then—"

He stopped, a wistful, far-away expression in his eyes—a look which contained all the hopes and dreams of a nation held in thrall by a ruthless enemy.

"How many people live in America, Egmont?" Henri asked, after a pause. "It is a great country, but can they send millions of soldiers? Is it as big as England?"

Egmont smiled condescendingly at the naïve question. Then a flush of shame tinged his cheeks as he recalled his own ignorance of the great free country across the seas until he had been enlightened by his cousin Bob, who was an American by birth. Had he not believed that America was a half-settled country, whose people were Indians and the other half black men?

"It is as big as all Europe, Henri," he replied solemnly; "and its people are more numerous than—than the English and French put together. And it has all the food it needs—enough to feed all of us. It's the greatest country in the world, Bob says. I wish some day I could see it."

"But have they enough ships? I heard Jean Beeckmann say it would take a thousand to bring a big army across, and England has lost most of her great ships."

"German talk, Henri!" was the scoffing reply. "That's what they want us to believe. But, listen! Bob says America's building ships so fast that the ocean will soon be alive with them. They're launching them every day,—big ships and little ships,—sometimes two and three a day; and soon they'll slide them into the water in whole fleets. They're building airships, too, so many they'll darken the skies. I've been watching for them every day. Who knows but that is one now?"

He pointed skyward where a dim speck was rapidly growing larger, as the big-winged bird flew straight toward them. With eyes bent on the

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aëroplane, the boys waited in breathless silence until, in the dazzling sunlight, a big black cross, painted on the underside of it, dashed their hopes.

"It's a German Gotha!" sighed Henri. "They're everywhere—nothing but Gothas and Taubes and Albatrosses. I hate the sight of them!"

"Well," resumed Egmont hopefully, "they will soon meet the American aëroplanes, and then they'll pay for all their terrible work."

A crackling of paper under his blouse suddenly recalled something that he had forgotten. Stealthily drawing forth the newspaper that had been lying, closely folded, against his breast, he added:

"Take this, Henri! It's the last copy of 'L'Echo Belge.' It's published in London, and is full of news. Take it and pass it around. But be careful no *Boches* see it. They'd tear it up and arrest you."

"May I read it?" was the eager query.

"Not here. That German sentry may see you. Quick, hide it, he's looking!"

Henri concealed the paper from sight, and then

began working it under his shirt so that not even a corner of it was visible. "Jean will want to read it," he mumbled. "Jean's sad and discouraged. He's heard nothing from Marie yet. It makes him nearly frantic to think of what may have happened to her."

"Tell Jean he must be of good heart. Marie will come back to him. But," yawning and rising, "I must be going. If we stay here longer, that sentry will get suspicious. Here's your fishing-rod. You may catch another fish on the way back. If you do, keep it until you get home. Adieu now! I cannot wait longer."

Picking up his battered cap, Egmont left his companion and strolled idly down the hillside in the direction of the sentry. He had learned from long experience that it was safer to face the Germans boldly than to slink away as if afraid of them.

Henri watched him a moment, and then, with a sigh, picked up his fishing-rod and made off in the direction of Ghent, choosing a shaded road where the soft dirt would not hurt his bare feet as the hard macadam highway did.

The German sentry at the foot of the hill waited for Egmont to approach. He was not particularly ugly or suspicious by nature, but his life had been made hard and difficult by the half-grown youngsters of the district, who taunted him behind his back and made strange faces at him. There were boys back in Germany whom he often thought of, for they were his own,—little Fritz and Carl,—and for their sakes he had often been easy with these children of a conquered race: but sometimes he thought his leniency was misunderstood. They were not only mischievous, but openly rebellious.

He planted himself squarely in front of Egmont, and glared hard at him. Egmont endured the challenge with calm eyes that never wavered an instant. The sentry grunted, and then asked:

“How old are you?”

“Fourteen next birthday.”

The man grunted again, and muttered surlily in German, “You lie, like all your people! You’re fourteen! I have said it! Hear me!”

Egmont flushed and then paled. He was used to the insulting language of the invaders, but the

sentry's words carried a threat with it. Many boys of fourteen and over had been carried away to work in Germany as prisoners. If he was suspected of being fourteen, what might not be his fate?

"No, thirteen," he replied, shaking his head. "I can prove it by the—"

"I said you were fourteen! Hear me!"

Egmont trembled before the bully in uniform, but there was nothing gained by irritating him. He kept silent, waiting for the other to proceed.

"You have good muscles," the sentry added, squeezing one of Egmont's biceps with a hand that hurt. "You could work in a factory—or a coal-mine."

He grinned and shook his head. "A boy of your age should work. I will see the commandant. He will make you tell the truth."

For a moment Egmont was struck cold with fear. If it suited the commandant to send him away to Germany, nothing he could say would be of any avail. And the work which he had to do for his country would be taken from him. He would never see Carl again, nor Henri, nor Leo-

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pold, nor any of his companions. It was not the German way to give captives an opportunity to say good-by to their friends and family.

The sentry was a new man to Egmont, and, as he was stationed on duty outside of the city, the boy was speculating upon his chances of not being recognized again if he made a break for liberty and escaped.

"You come with me," added the man, after a pause. "I will make you say fourteen. Understand? You're fourteen! Say it now!"

"Fourteen," Egmont repeated unwillingly.

"Ah ha! I said it! And now you said it! That makes you fourteen—and a liar! Hear that?"

Egmont said nothing, but in his mind he was saying that, if the chance ever came, he would repay the sentry for his words. Having properly subjugated his victim and forced him to deny his own words, the man seemed immensely pleased. He leered at him, and pinched one of his cheeks.

"*Ach!* It's not so hard as I thought. You need good German food to make you stronger. See, the flesh is soft. You're fourteen, but you're

not strong enough yet to work for Germany. Maybe I 'll let you go this time, but next time—look out!”

Egmont drew a deep sigh of relief. He would not be haled before the commandant to undergo an examination as to his age and fitness. In his relief he smiled up at the sentry, who, mistaking it for boyish impudence, suddenly raised a hand and smote him in the face.

Egmont went down before the unexpected blow, and lay on the grass a moment in stunned silence. When his senses came back to him, a slow, sullen rage at this unprovoked attack made him for a moment oblivious of everything else. All caution and prudence vanished from his mind.

“You German pig!” he growled in his own language.

“What 's that! Speak it again!”

Unable to grasp the meaning of the words, the sentry leaned threateningly over him, a hand raised as if to repeat the blow. But Egmont's consuming wrath had not blinded him to his danger, and the possible chance of escape from his tormentor was uppermost in his mind. The Ger-

man was firmly planted on two feet, with his legs far apart, but in bending forward he was in danger of losing his balance through any slight mishap. Egmont saw his opportunity, and with the swiftness and sureness of youth he took advantage of it.

He shot through the soldier's legs with one spring, and, at the proper moment, caught an ankle in either hand and tripped the burly figure as easily as an acrobat would leap through a paper hoop and never touch the rim. The man went down with a thud, plowing up the dirt with both hands and the tip of his nose.

When he regained his feet, the boy was a considerable distance away, making for a grove of trees to the left of the barracks. The discomfited sentry was aching for revenge, and his rifle, lying where he had dropped it, offered him the opportunity. He seized it with an oath and raised it to his shoulder.

But he did not fire at the fleeing boy. A crafty expression came into his face. He glanced in the direction of the barracks to see if any of his comrades had witnessed his downfall. If not,

then why make a fuss? There would be awkward explanations to make, and perhaps in the end he would be laughed at for being toppled over in the dirt by a boy.

He lowered his rifle just as Egmont reached the edge of the grove and plunged into its welcome shade. "*Ach!* I'll teach him manners next time!" he growled. "Little camel-pig! I made him say it! Fourteen he is! He said it! Called himself a liar!"

Smiling with satisfaction at the remembrance of this petty triumph, he dusted off his uniform, inflated his chest, and resumed his pacing, with the air of one who had defeated a formidable enemy.

CHAPTER II

BOB LANE HAS AN IDEA

EGMONT D'ANETHAN was not fourteen, but so dangerously close to it that it made him shudder whenever he thought of the deportation of the Belgian boys and girls to Germany for work in the mines and factories; for fourteen was the age fixed by the decrees of Berlin, and in a few months that momentous birthday would come for him. His adventure with the German sentry forced home another unpleasant truth—he was large for his age, he *looked* fourteen; and this decided the invaders in their selection far more than the actual number of one's years. They wanted no weak, sickly, undersized youths, even if they were above fourteen.

The realization of all this was a distinct shock to him, and on his way back to the city he avoided the German uniform wherever he saw it, although this was somewhat difficult, for, since the early

occupation of Brussels by the enemy nearly four years before, sentries were stationed at every corner, and stray officers and soldiers had the disagreeable habit of popping out of doorways in the most unexpected way.

Belgium had been conquered physically, but the brave spirits of the people had not been broken. They were still at war with Germany. But it was a war of wits rather than of arms. In spite of the enemy's vaunted intelligence department and hordes of spies, a system of underground communication between the cities and the Belgian army near the coast was kept up, and it was impossible to suppress outside news and prevent it from reaching the beleaguered nation.

The irritation of the German intelligence officers at being outwitted by their little foe was natural enough, and in their frenzy, at times, they seized innocent people and shot them as spies. One could hardly take a walk or visit a friend without being shadowed by some more or less stupid officer in uniform or in civilian clothes.

Reaching the Boulevard du Midi by a circuitous route, Egmont found himself among the

throngs of people out for the afternoon airing. He drew a sigh of relief, for there was safety in numbers. Hurrying along for a few blocks, he turned into a side street, and then suddenly darted through the arched portico of an imposing house and disappeared from view.

The Palais d'Anethan was the home of Count d'Anethan, a man long past seventy, whose age and infirmities had kept him from defending his country with arms, but had not prevented him from serving her with his intellect. The d'Anethans were of ancient lineage, and one of the most respected families in Belgium. Egmont d'Anethan would succeed his grandfather, in time, and become Count d'Anethan: but as he entered the stately home of his titled ancestor, he looked anything but a count in dress and appearance.

His clothes, patched and dirty, were those of a common street urchin; his feet were bare and grimy now with the mud of the country; his hair was tousled and gritty with dust; his hands and face were smudged and stained. But his eyes shone brightly with the unquenchable spirit of his proud race.

Passing through the arch to the courtyard, he reached the grand staircase, and ascended to a private room above, where his coming was welcomed by another boy of about his own age. Bob Lane was an American first and a Belgian afterward. His mother, Count d'Anethan's daughter, had married Herbert Lane, a former attaché of the American Legation in Brussels; a post which he relinquished in a few years to return to America, where Bob had been brought up in the true democratic way.

During that fateful summer when Germany descended upon her little neighbor and with fire and sword attempted to obliterate her, Bob, who had lost his father the year before, was visiting his grandfather in Brussels, and the close attachment that had sprung up between him and his cousin Egmont seemed to be only strengthened by the stirring events that shocked the whole civilized world.

His mother, broken in health by the death of her husband and the tragic suffering of her own country, could not cross the ocean to join her son, but advised him, if he wished, to remain with his

grandfather, rendering such help as a neutral could to his relatives and friends. Through the months and months when the starvation of Belgium hung in the balance, which America's relief-ships finally saved, Bob stood loyally by the stricken people with whom he claimed kinship.

When America entered the war, Count d'Anethan had come to him and advised him to leave the country with the rest of the Americans: but the weary eyes of his grandfather were filled with tears when he spoke. "Your mother needs you, Bob," he said: "You can do nothing more here now. We must bear our grief the best we can."

Looking the old man in the face, with eyes that reflected the spirit of a long line of d'Anethans, Bob had replied: "No, Grandfather, I 'm not going to leave you. I 'll stay here until the American soldiers sweep the Huns out of Belgium."

Count d'Anethan shook his head as he smiled wistfully and affectionately at this grandson who had come to him from across the ocean to cheer his declining years. "It will be a long time," he faltered. "America is not prepared."

"That 's so," admitted Bob, ruefully. Then

smiling, with a gleam of pride in his eyes: "But you don't know America. She'll prepare, and come across with enough soldiers to whip the *Boches*. She'll never quit until it's done!"

"How will she get here without ships?" mildly asked the aged count, smiling at the cock-sureness of this young American grandson.

"Build them!" was the prompt retort.

In spite of his skepticism, Count d'Anethan experienced a little glow of hope and enthusiasm, for Bob had a way of making others share his own optimistic prophecies.

"She's done wonderful things in feeding our people," murmured the Count. "Wonderful! Without America we should have starved. Belgium will never forget."

"Then she'll help you lick the enemy. She'll drive them across the Rhine. Wait and see! I want to be here when the American soldiers come. I'll shout myself hoarse when I see the Stars and Stripes passing through Brussels on the way to Berlin."

Egmont had clapped his cousin on the shoulder in an excess of enthusiasm. "I know they'll

come, Bob, these Americans!" he exclaimed. "It will be a gala day for Brussels then. Grandfather, you must believe it and pray for it. You 'll live to see our country's wrongs avenged."

"I hope so, Egmont, I hope so! Yes," he added, stiffening his bent figure to the soldier's attitude, "the day must come when Belgium shall rise triumphant from her ashes! And God grant it may be the Americans who will help us!"

"*Vive la Belgique! Vive l'America!*" shouted Egmont, tossing his cap in the air.

"Hurrah for the good old United States!" laughed Bob, joining in the enthusiasm.

But the days and weeks and months had passed, and still the Americans had n't come. Germany had become more brutal, if possible, toward her small neighbor, deporting the young and vigorous to work in her mines and factories. The world had looked on in horror and uttered protest after protest, but nothing except a mightier power than his own could swerve the Hun from his diabolical way.

Meanwhile Bob had not rested idly, waiting for the coming of the armies that were to make the

world safe for democracy. There was plenty of work to do. Belgium—Brussels, in particular—was isolated from the rest of the world. She was fed on German stories of success and deleted accounts of what was happening in America. Like a wet blanket smothering a fire, the constant suppression of cheering news and the steady publication of exaggerated victories of the German armies were beginning to have an effect. The nation that had faced death and disaster by sword and fire was in danger of losing its spirit through inaction and lonely isolation. The morale of the aged and broken-spirited citizens began to waver.

All the young men had been killed or were in the army with King Albert, and most of the young women had been deported to Germany. Only the very young and old remained to keep the home fires burning, and the old were showing signs of breaking under their grief and losses.

The hope of Belgium, therefore, rested upon the young. They were as defiant and invincible as their fathers. Nothing could break their restive spirits, not even half rations or semi-starvation. They hated the enemy that had enslaved

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their country, scoffed at the fat soldiers on the squares, and secretly spat at their uniforms. Secretly, if not openly, defiant, they kept the spirit of Belgium smouldering.

In America, Bob had been a typical boy, and the team spirit was strong within him. Baseball, football, and all the other outdoor sports, had taught him the advantage of coöperation in play and work.

Working alone and independently, the boys of Brussels were a great help in cheering the old men and women: but their patriotism needed direction and organization to make it effective. Something had to be done to counteract the demoralizing influence of the German false reports, the people had to be kept in touch with their army, coöperating with the Allies on the western front.

"Egmont," Bob said one day to his cousin, "I'm going to organize the 'Boy Vigilantes of Brussels.' "

"What's that?" asked Egmont, a little puzzled by the abrupt announcement. "Vigilantes? I don't know what they are."

"No, but in America we have them. They're writers, who give their services to counteract the German propaganda. They spread true stories of what's happening every day in my country; and when they hear of a German lie, they nail it on the spot."

"I did n't know you had boy writers doing that in America," said Egmont, in surprise.

Bob laughed good-naturedly. "I did n't quite mean that," he explained. "These writers are not boys. They're men and women. The first Vigilantes were men, and they restored order in California and the West at a time when nobody's life was safe from the desperadoes who had flocked there."

In a graphic way he sketched the early history of the Vigilantes, and their adventurous career in the days when life in the turbulent Far West was almost as uncertain as in Belgium under the iron heel of Germany.

"The men here can't organize such a secret society," Bob added, "for all except the old are dead or in prison or fighting with King Albert. But

why can't the boys of Belgium become Vigilantes?"

Egmont's eyes opened wide in astonishment, for he had not yet entirely grasped the full meaning of the other's words. "Could we do it?" he stammered. "We could n't fight the Huns. They're too many for us, and they're men, and we're only boys."

"I did n't mean to fight them with arms, Egmont," was the smiling reply. "No, we could n't do that. But we could band together, and do lots of things to help. There are the English papers and 'L'Echo Belge.' They tell the truth about what's happening. Could n't we smuggle them around and let the Reynteins and the de Lignes and the d'Oultremonts read them? It would certainly cheer dear old Madame de Chokier and Marie Van de Weyer if they could read about their sons and grandsons with King Albert, would n't it?"

"Yes—yes! Of course! And Leo Beeckmann would help us; so would Guy d'Assches. They'd all help."

"Then we should organize at once. Invite Guy and Leopold and Phil and all the other boys you can trust. We must be sure of whom we take in. We can't have any traitors."

From this small beginning, the Boy Vigilantes of Belgium had spread to include most of the country held by the Germans. Bob and Egmont had been less ambitious in their plans than circumstances determined, for they called their organization "The Boy Vigilantes of Brussels" at first: but later, by their underground system of communication, it spread until there were branches organized in Ghent, in Antwerp, in war-torn Malines, as far east as Liège, and in the west to the very gates of Bruges.

It was a boy propaganda, and therefore most difficult for the Germans to ferret out and crush. There were no printed documents, no letters to fall into the hands of the invaders to incriminate the members; nothing definite that could point to Bob or Egmont, to Phil or Leo, as the ringleaders. Henri Rogier, of Ghent, made occasional fishing-trips or took long tramps in the country: but

ragged, barefooted, and disreputable in appearance, he looked to be the most harmless vagrant in the world.

Yet Henri, and Albert de Decker of Antwerp, and Alva Chassé of Malines, as well as dozens of other Belgian boys of the different towns and villages, met and exchanged messages by word of mouth. Sometimes it was only a message of cheer, and at other times it was important military information that would be of value to the Allies, for the organization had increased until Belgium was covered by a spy system that defied the intelligence department of the German army.

Bob and Egmont had worked assiduously to make the Vigilantes a power to help their stricken country. It gave them an outlet for their restless spirits, and the very secrecy of their work appealed to their imagination. The old Count d'Anethan never dreamed of the plots hatched under his roof. Perhaps if he had fear for the boys would have compelled him to stop it; and certainly, if it were discovered, the German rulers would have unhesitatingly imprisoned or shot him for harboring spies.

It was the fear of directing suspicion to their grandfather's house that had induced the boys to locate their meeting-place in an abandoned sewer under the lower part of the city. This could be reached by two small canals, whose waters, fed by the Senne River, rarely rose high enough to close any of the entrances. Like rats with many holes through which they could scurry if surprised, the young Vigilantes felt safe and secure in their artificial tunnel.

Each member, before he was given a part to perform, had to take the oath of secrecy, which had been prepared by Bob and Egmont:

"I shall fear nothing, but brave everything, until my beloved country is freed of the tyrants. I pledge my life, and all I have and am, to do everything to help my country and king. If I am captured, I swear that I will not divulge any of the secrets of the Vigilantes, nor will I betray any of my comrades nor get them in trouble. I pledge myself to carry out the orders given me and keep them secret from the enemy until the day comes when Germany is driven out of the country and Belgium is once more free."

In Brussels there were twoscore members: in Antwerp nearly as many; a dozen in Ghent; and

ten in Malines. But in each of these places were numerous "tenderfeet," who shared some of the responsibilities of the regular members and aspired some day to be admitted as full-fledged Vigilantes. They worked indefatigably to gather news of value, listening, observing, searching for information to spread by word of mouth from one end of Belgium to the other.

The Boy Vigilantes of Belgium had already accomplished much for their country, and their work still went on, for they continued to spread among their countrymen the real facts of the war and to put new cheer into the hearts of the aged and infirm whose burden had become almost unbearable.

CHAPTER III

TEACHING THE HUNS A TRICK

WHEN Egmont met his cousin in the upper room of the Palais d'Anethan, after his adventure with the German sentry, he was shaken and excited, and stood a moment in breathless silence.

"Did you see Henri?" Bob asked eagerly.

"Yes," was the reply, accompanied by a nod of the head. "I told him the news, and he will carry it to Ghent."

"That ought to cheer them up, then," Bob said, smiling grimly. "I don't know of anything better that has come to us for a long time. But," observing Egmont shrewdly, "you look tired and pale. Anything happen to you on the way?"

"No—yes."

Bob waited for him to explain his contradictory answer, watching him anxiously, for it was apparent that Egmont was shaken and troubled by something out of the ordinary.

"Bob, do I look as if I might be fourteen?" his cousin asked suddenly.

"Why, yes, you might almost pass for fifteen, cousin. You always were big for your age. So am I. Why?"

Egmont gulped before replying. "I was stopped by a sentry, and he threatened to have me sent to Germany to work in the mines. He said I was fourteen, and forced me to repeat his lie. I was helpless, of course."

Bob's face grew serious. "And then what?"

Egmont smiled at the memory of what had followed. "After I had been so obliging to the fat pig, he knocked me down. Then—then—I got away. I tripped him, and ran for the woods."

"It's a wonder he did n't shoot you!" Bob exclaimed. "They shoot for less than that."

"I think he intended to. Once I turned my head, and he was aiming his rifle at me. But he did n't shoot. Anyway, I don't believe he could have hit me, I was running and dodging so fast; very few of these sentries can shoot straight. If they could, they'd be at the front."

"Yes," nodded Bob, "they are only fat, bald-headed *Landwehr* in Brussels. That's why we have so little trouble with them. They're stupid clerks and business men turned into soldiers."

Egmont agreed with him, for, since the battle-line had moved farther west, Germany's real fighters had disappeared, leaving Brussels in charge of the older men. They had no fear of an uprising in their rear, for had not all of Belgium's young men been driven back of Ypres?

"If that is true, Egmont, you'll have to be more careful," Bob added after a pause. "If they think you look old enough to work, they'll take you away to Germany. That would be worse than—than almost anything. Prisoners who work in the mines either die or come back living wrecks."

"Are n't you in danger, too, Bob?" asked Egmont. "You look older than I do, and you're taller?"

"Yes, I've been expecting it for some time. But they'll never take me to Germany! Not on your life! I'll see to that."

"How can you help it if they seize you?" asked Egmont, knitting his eyebrows in surprise.

Bob shrugged his shoulders expressively. "Oh, I 'll find a way—break away, or wreck their train. I 'll never cross the line into Germany as a prisoner."

This boastful statement impressed his cousin, for Egmont had great admiration for the bravery and resourcefulness of Bob Lane. More than once he had extricated himself and others from difficult positions. It was the American way. Egmont sighed.

"I hope they 'll never try to take us," he added.

"No, Egmont, I hope not, but I suppose we ought to be prepared for it and make our plans. If we 're taken, or have to leave Belgium, somebody else must take our places. The work can't stop."

"I don't like to think of it," muttered Egmont, scowling. "We 're needed here."

"Sure! but for the sake of the cause we must be prepared. It 's been bothering me a good deal lately. Every day some German officer or sentry stares at me as if he was sizing me up. I 'm get-

ting too big to be allowed to stay. The time will come soon when they 'll try to deport me."

"I had n't thought of it before to-day," replied Egmont, walking the floor nervously. "I don't know what I 'll do if they seize me. I—I—think—I 'd rather die."

"You would n't do your country any good by dying," smiled Bob. "It's better to live for it. Now my plan is to choose now some of the smaller boys we can trust to take our places if we 're deported or vanish. There's Leo and Albert. Why not elect them as our successors and pledge them to go on with the work?"

"Guy d'Assches is cleverer than either Leopold or Albert," suggested Egmont.

"Well, put Guy in, or Georges de Ligne. They're both good."

"I don't like to think of it," Egmont muttered again, shuddering. "Do you think there's much danger of our being taken?"

"My dear cousin, anything's likely to happen in Belgium, but why worry? I'm not going to let it trouble me. I'm going ahead just as if I never expected anything to happen to me. It's

the way the soldier goes into battle. If he stopped to think of death every time he heard a bullet whine over his head, he would n't have time to do anything."

Egmont shook off the depression that had temporarily unnerved him, and nodded his head.

"Yes, of course, cousin," he replied. "I'm ashamed of myself for appearing so weak. I'll not speak so again. We'll go on until our time comes, and then—"

"If they do get us into Germany," was the smiling interruption, "we'll start organizing. Vigilantes over there to plague them. We might smuggle back some useful information to Guy and Leo and the other members."

They laughed at such a wild scheme to introduce in Germany itself the system of spying that had proved so successful at home. They were young and hopeful, and danger had become such a common part of their daily life that they could make light of it. Belgium had been in a state of terror for nearly four years until the noise of big guns and the whine of enemy airships float-

ing overhead no longer surprised or frightened any one. War had been accepted as the natural thing, and people went about their business in dull apathy day after day.

Bob, who had been waiting to see Egmont on important business, suddenly recalled that his cousin's story had completely driven this from his mind. With a little catch of his breath, he now remembered it, and turned excitedly to the other.

"Egmont, I forgot!" he exclaimed. "We've just found something important. Guy and I stumbled upon it this morning."

"What is it?" asked Egmont, aroused by the other's eagerness.

"The key to the German mines under the Hôtel de Ville. The whole square is mined, ready to be blown up the moment the Huns have to evacuate Brussels."

"You've found the mines?"

"Not exactly, but something better. We've found the wires that lead to them. The mines are laid deep down under the cellars, and we could hardly dig for them, but they're all con-

nected by wires that run into the old Guild House on the corner. That 's where the German officers are quartered, you know."

Egmont nodded, and Bob went on excitedly, but in a lower voice, as if the walls might have ears that could not be trusted with such a weighty secret.

"They start from the cellar of the corner Guild House, and run in all directions to the mines. A touch of a button would, of course, blow up the whole square, wrecking the Hôtel de Ville, the *Maison du Roi*, and all the historic guild houses of the archers and skippers and printers. It would be terrible!"

"The dastardly cowards!" exclaimed Egmont, angrily. "They'd destroy everything that is beautiful in Belgium! They stop at nothing! Why do they want to blow up all we have left, Bob? Is that war?"

"Is it war to bayonet and kill women and children?" asked Bob, in a hard voice. "Is it war to torture prisoners and starve non-combatants? No, it's savagery, Egmont, the kind of savagery that our American Indians would be ashamed of!

But it's Germany's method of war. We ought to know it by this time. If she's forced to evacuate Belgium, she'll blow up or destroy every building that she can. That's why we must defeat her plans, and save the superb Grande Place."

"Save it? How can we do that?"

Egmont looked stupidly at his cousin, as he asked this question. Then seeing the light in the other's eyes, he added, "Oh, you mean we can cut the wires or dig up the mines?"

"If we cut the wires would n't they discover the break in time and repair them?" queried Bob, smiling.

"Yes, of course, and then keep a watch down there for any one attempting to tamper with them again."

"Sure, and if we tried it the second time we'd get nabbed. We can't run that risk. But there's another trick we can play, and they'll never get on to it until it's too late."

"I don't understand," murmured Egmont.

"I'll explain," said Bob. "We're going to cut the wires, all of them, one by one—and then

repair them." Then, as his cousin stared blankly at him, he laughed good-naturedly. "See these, Egmont," and he held up a bunch of short wires, carefully insulated with cotton sheathing. "What do you think they are?"

"Pieces of copper wire, are n't they?"

"They look like that, don't they—the kind of wires you use for electrical work? But they're not, Egmont. There's no wire in them. The center of each is nothing but a strip of candle-wick. Guy and I wrapped them carefully with this insulation that we stripped off of some old wires. Nobody, by looking at them, could tell them from the real thing, could they?"

Egmont shook his head as he took one of the strips in his hand and closely examined it.

"Well," Bob continued, "we're going to cut the wires that connect the mines—cut several inches out of each one—and then repair the break with these strips of candle-wick. No inquisitive German, nosing around down there, would ever discover the trick. He'd report the wires in good condition. Then, on the day set for the explosion, what would happen? There would be

no explosion! The electricity could n't bridge the gap."

With a hand trembling with excitement, Egmont seized one of the imitation wires again and looked at it. Then he smiled happily. "They won't be able to blow up the square, you mean, Bob?"

"Not with those mines laid for the purpose, and if they had to leave in a hurry they would n't have time to lay others. The order to blow up the square would be left until the last moment. So they wouldn't have time to do much damage."

"But where are the mines and wires?" demanded Egmont. "I want to help cut them—to have a hand in it."

"Of course, the future Count d'Anethan must be one of those who are to save Belgium's beautiful capital from destruction by the Huns. If you're rested now, we'll go. Guy will be waiting for us. We want to finish the job before night."

Forgetting all his weariness and hunger, Egmont picked up his cap and followed his cousin down the broad stairway and through the arched

courtyard into the street. They waited at the entrance long enough to look up and down the street for any signs of German soldiers, and then scurried along to another house a block away.

This was the home of Guy d'Assches, a boy a year or two younger than either of the cousins. Guy had been expecting them, and let them in. "Why didn't you come before?" he asked. "I've been waiting hours for you."

"I had to explain our little scheme to Egmont," Bob replied. "He knows all about it now."

"Isn't it a fine idea?" asked Guy, eagerly.

"The best yet! We must hurry and fix the wires. Something might happen to set off the mines by accident. Suppose some stupid soldier should tamper with them."

"No danger of that," laughed Bob. "They won't have the wires connected with the battery. That would be too dangerous."

"We ought to go out one at a time," said Guy, "otherwise we'll excite some Hun's suspicion. If a sentry sees three boys together, he thinks he sees an army, and instantly gets excited. Suppose we separate now, and meet in the sewer."

"That's safer," replied Bob. "I'll start first."

Leaving the house stealthily, he made his way along the street until he reached the main boulevard, where his identity was immediately lost among the crowd there. Following the stream of pedestrians to the lower part of the town, he turned once more into a narrow side street lined with old houses, whose faded fronts had a picturesque effect.

A few blocks farther brought him to one of the canals that had been partly covered. These canals, fed by the Senne River, had at one time been important arteries of commerce, but many of them had been abandoned and partly or completely arched over.

Bob halted at one of the arches, and began aimlessly, tossing small stones and chips into the water; but all the while he was furtively glancing back and in front of him to see if any uniformed German was watching him. Suddenly he slipped down out of sight so swiftly that an observer might have thought the ground had opened to receive him.

Once out of sight in the shallow canal, he waded up it rapidly until he came to a familiar opening, which he knew to be the old, abandoned sewer that entered the canal at right angles, above the water-line. Dripping and muddy, he crawled through the opening of the dry sewer and threw himself down on the hard stone floor to wait for his companions.

They appeared a few moments later, creeping through the darkness like half-drowned rats. Guy came first, reaching the sewer from the right, and Egmont next, from the left. Bob rose and struck a match, with which he lighted small candles.

"This way, Egmont," he whispered to his cousin. "Follow me!"

Then followed a long, tortuous, underground trip, which, to the uninitiated, would have been decidedly puzzling; but the boys knew every canal and every foot of the sewer. When they came to a point half a mile away from the first entrance, Bob stopped and raised a hand.

"We're right under the corner Guild House," he whispered. "The bunch of wires comes down

here. Here they are, Egmont. You can see them!"

Egmont stepped eagerly forward and gazed at the strands of electric wires that ran through a metal tube over his head, and then spread out in all directions. They had been installed by an expert, for they were carefully protected and firmly fastened to little brackets in the sides of the walls.

"Now we'll teach the Huns a trick or two!" murmured Bob, in a low voice. "Let me have your cutters, Guy. I'll begin on this wire."

CHAPTER IV

UNDER THE GUILD HOUSE

THE plan of the young Vigilantes was simple, and they worked silently and swiftly. Bob clipped the wires where they were exposed after leaving the metal tube, cutting a piece from each one and then replacing it with a strip of the fake wire, skilfully concealing the joinings with extra strips of insulation. They worked these over carefully, so that no inspector, sent down to examine the wires, would suspect they had been tampered with.

Finally Bob grunted. "There! I don't believe any one will discover the trick," he said. "What do you think?"

Guy and Egmont made a careful examination of his work before answering.

"Good!" exclaimed Guy. "I could n't tell them from real wires myself. No fat-witted *Boche* will ever see the difference."

Egmont nodded his head vigorously. "You ought to have been an electrician, Bob," he said. "You've done a splendid job."

"Every American boy's an electrician," was the rejoinder. "I used to wire electric bells before I was ten. Now if the job suits you, we'll get out of here."

"Listen!" exclaimed Egmont. "What's that noise?"

"The German officers in the Guild House over our heads," replied Guy. "They're carousing, as usual."

The muffled rumbling overhead could hardly be identified as laughter and singing; but Bob assured his cousin that Guy was right. They had heard it before, when they first made their discovery of the wires.

"This metal tube runs directly into the cellar of the Guild House," he explained, "and if the cellar door is open, the noise comes right through it. There, they've closed the door, and we can't hear them any more."

The muffled rumble of voices had stopped, and all was again quiet in their subterranean hiding-

place. They waited a few moments to see if it was renewed.

"How 'd they get down here to string the wires?" Egmont whispered, after a long pause.

"Followed the sewer as we did, I suppose," replied Bob. "They must have known about it. They had maps and plans of the city long before the war. Brussels was full of German spies. They knew more about the city than lots of Belgians. I should n't be surprised if they had the plan for mining it drawn up years ago."

"Yes," sighed Egmont, "some of our best friends were traitors. You remember the palace of Duke d'Arenberg. It was mined and tunneled. The duke was a German, and before the war he removed most of his valuables to Germany. He pretended to be a Belgian at heart, but he was a traitor. The poor duchess must have had a terrible time."

"Who was the duchess? Was she a German, too?" asked Bob, who was not familiar with the nobility.

"No, she was a Belgian—the daughter of the Princess de Ligne. She must have suffered ter-

ribly when she discovered the duke was a traitor in disguise."

"It 's no worse than—" Guy began, when Bob interrupted him with a cautious whisper.

"The cellar door 's open again. Hear the noise!"

They listened once more in silence until the sound died away.

"I 'd like to get a peep into the Guild House to see what they 're doing," remarked Guy. "We might learn something important."

"And get shot for our pains," replied Egmont.

"I 'll bet they have some way of getting down here from the cellar," Bob said thoughtfully. "I don't believe, after all, they came in here by the canals. Who owned the corner Guild House before the war?"

"Why," Egmont began hesitatingly, "I don't remember his name."

"It was a German," interrupted Guy. "I remember now. He was an old, fat, coffee merchant. I heard some one say—I think it was Albert—that he turned out to be a spy. His place was full of boxes and barrels, which had

guns and ammunition packed in them. When the Germans entered the city, the officers went straight to his place."

"Then it was all deliberately planned," Bob said. "Perhaps there's a way of getting down here from the cellar. I'm going to look for it."

Guy and Egmont were both eager to join in the search, and they began a careful examination of the sewer wall.

"If this metal tube runs down from the cellar," Bob added a moment later, "the entrance, if there's one, must be somewhere near it. No use looking more than a dozen feet on either side."

With their field of exploration narrowed by this sensible conclusion, they renewed their search, casting the light from their candles back and forth, and feeling the rough sides of the stone vault with their hands.

Suddenly Bob touched something hard and smooth that was neither stone nor brick.

"What's this?" he asked excitedly. Then, a moment later, he answered his own question: "it's an iron door! Yes, here are the hinges.

It's curved to fit the roof of the sewer. It must be the entrance to the cellar!"

Their excitement was great, but for a moment they were undecided what to do. If the door led directly into the cellar of the Guild House, which the Germans were using as an officers' club and meeting-place, it might be dangerous to force it open. Finally, however, Bob placed both hands against the iron plate and pushed upward. The door yielded slowly to his effort. "It's not locked!" he whispered. "See! I can open it."

"Better not," cautioned Egmont. "We might get caught in a trap."

"We don't want to do that," was the murmured reply, "but I'm crazy to get a look at what's above."

Bob stopped a moment and considered. "Guy," he said then, "stand by the metal pipe and listen. I'm going through this door. You can give me the signal if any one opens the cellar door above, and I can get back without being seen."

Egmont was n't quite sure that they should

undertake this risky enterprise, but Guy nodded his head, and took his station where the wires came through the roof. Bob once more applied an upward pressure to the iron door, and, with his cousin's assistance, it was soon forced open.

They listened intently for some time before making another move. There was no noise from above. It was as quiet and deathlike in the musty cellar as in the sewer.

"Hand me the candle," Bob whispered. "I can't see a thing up here."

Then, holding the candle, he mounted on his cousin's shoulders until he was high enough to thrust his head and shoulders through the opening. From this point of advantage, he got a clear view of the space above.

"It is n't the cellar," he whispered down to the others. "It's a sort of subcellar. There's another above this. I don't believe any one comes down here very often."

"It may be the wine-cellar," replied Egmont.

"Then we'll have to be careful, for they're drinking enough up there to need a new supply before long. Anyway, I'm going to explore."

Placing the candle on the floor, he pulled himself up until he stood in the black, musty subcellar of the old Guild House. The place was filled with boxes and barrels, many of them filled with rare old vintages of the best wine, and others, broken open and empty, testifying to the thirst of the invading enemy. Guy and Egmont waited anxiously below. The fear that some one might come and surprise Bob made them nervous.

But it was n't casks of wine that the latter was looking for. Now that he was in the subcellar, he was curious to know how it was entered from above. He finally stumbled upon a rude pair of steps in one corner.

He could now hear the muffled noises more distinctly. The Germans were talking and laughing loudly, breaking out occasionally into rough song. The sounds came to Bob's ears as clearly as though they were in the next room. He wanted to get a look into the club-room, but the danger attending this made him hesitate.

Finally, curiosity got the better of him, but he was still cautious. Returning to the iron door, he whispered to his companions: "I've found

the stairs leading above. I'm going up to explore."

"Better not, Bob," expostulated Guy. "You might get caught, and then all our fixing of the wires will be wasted."

"I'm not going to get caught, nor am I going to spoil our job," was the reply. "I want you and Egmont to close the door, and keep it closed until I rap on it. No, I can open it from this side when I want to return."

"Bob, you'll be captured and shot!" exclaimed Egmont. "Please don't do it!"

"I'm not going to run any risk, Egmont. If anybody comes down here, I can hide behind the boxes and casks. There's plenty of room. He couldn't find me in this dark hole for a week. There's no danger. I'll be very careful."

Although willing to risk danger, when necessary, Bob had never been foolhardy, and both of his companions realized this. The secrecy of their cause was as much his as theirs, and after a few more words of protest they let him have his own way.

Creeping slowly up the stairs, Bob fumbled

around in the dark for the latch of the door above. He had extinguished his candle and dropped it in his pocket for future use. A light might betray him.

It was an ordinary trap-door that he encountered, let into the floor of the cellar proper, and swinging upward. Bob tested it and found it unlocked. Inch by inch, listening cautiously and peering intently through the widening crack, he raised it until it was far enough open to give him a good view of the upper cellar.

Like the subcellar it seemed filled with a motley collection of boxes and casks. They rose tier upon tier on all four sides. It was not necessary to use his candle to see. A path of strong daylight poured through an open doorway at the head of the stairs that led into the rooms above. It was through this opening that the boisterous laughing and carousing came.

Bob paused a long time, listening and looking, holding the trap-door in such a position that he could quickly close it if any one appeared. The cellar, like the subcellar, was deserted, but there was more danger of being surprised here. He

had no desire to push his investigations further.

He had learned all that was necessary. The old German coffee-merchant, who had lived in the corner Guild House before the invasion, had secretly prepared his place for the reception of the German officers. The subcellar had been dug below the main cellar after the innocent appearing coffee-merchant had taken possession of the building, and the opening into the abandoned sewer had then been cut and the iron door fitted to it.

Perhaps the mines to blow up the square had even been laid prior to the invasion, in order to destroy that part of the city in the rear of the Belgian army if, for any reason, the Germans had been checked. It was certainly no worse than many other of the diabolical plans laid by the Huns.

The boisterous carousing of the German officers struck Bob with peculiar force, and made him shudder with disgust and rage. While the Belgians suffered the torments of hunger and fear, the invaders drank toasts, and plotted, and planned further outrages. The blood mounted

to his forehead, and his heart swelled with anger.

"I 'd like to blow up the whole square and kill them all," he muttered under his breath. "I could do it too."

He thought of the great power that had suddenly been put in his possession. He had not examined the upper ends of the wires coming through the iron tube, but he had no doubt they were connected with an electric battery, or could be connected in a short time. By replacing the pieces of wire he had cut out, he could then exterminate all the staff officers assembled in the building. More than that, he could blow into eternity whole regiments of Germans quartered in the different buildings of the square.

But he would wreck the most magnificent buildings of any capital in the world—the superb Grande Place, second to none in Europe, with the beautiful Hôtel de Ville, the galleried and much-gilded *Maison du Roi*, and the many guild houses of the archers and skippers, the printers and merchants. Not only that, but hundreds of innocent Belgians—men, women, and children—would meet their fate with the Germans.

No! such a thought was too terrible for consideration. He had to be content with his present work. He had to save rather than destroy. It was not the mission of the Boy Vigilantes to make conditions worse in Brussels, even though a few important German officers would be killed in the process.

He sighed and started to close the door. There was no object in pursuing his investigations further, and his two companions would be growing restless and anxious. Suddenly back of him a queer noise arrested his attention. It sounded as if some one had tried to suppress a sneeze by smothering it in his hands. The muffled effect was so distinctly human, and at the same time alarming, that Bob stood a moment in rigid silence, holding the door partly open.

His first thought was that it came from either Guy or Egmont, who, in their anxiety for him, had raised the iron door to see if he was safe. He closed the cellar door gently, and stood a moment in the darkness at the head of the stairs. There was no sound, no repetition of the sneeze, nothing to indicate that any one was near him.

“Guy!” he called softly. “Egmont!”

He waited for an answer, but none came. With the trap-door closed over his head, he felt reasonably safe from the Germans above, and he repeated the call in a louder voice. If the door opening into the sewer was lifted, his companions could hear him this time. But again there was no response.

For the first time Bob felt genuine alarm. He could not be mistaken in that suppressed sneeze. Some one was in the dark subcellar with him, and if it was neither Guy nor Egmont, who was it? Bob asked himself this question, and answered it in quaking fear. Who else could it be but a German officer or spy?

CHAPTER V

THE FIGHT IN THE CELLAR

IN the moments that followed Bob seemed to live an age, almost an eternity, for the thought that he was trapped in the subcellar terrified him. There was no escape upward, for if he climbed through the trap-door into the cellar he would make his capture all the more certain. His enemy could follow him, close the trap-door, and summon help from above.

His one hope was to hide in the darkness of the subcellar and grope his way toward the iron door of the sewer and get through it. Meanwhile, if his unknown enemy were creeping upon him, he would corner him at the foot of the stairs unless he changed his position. His adversary had the advantage in the dark. He knew Bob's exact position, while the boy had n't the vaguest notion of where his enemy was hiding.

Realizing this, Bob decided to act before he

was caught. Instead of creeping down the short flight of stairs where the man would expect to meet him, he swung over the side and clung to the top step a moment to listen. Nothing had moved in the place, and so far as Bob could tell by any noise the subcellar was deserted.

But experience had taught him extreme caution. A wily enemy would not expose his position by making a noise. He would wait in breathless silence for Bob to betray his position. Hanging there by the top step so that his body was suspended directly under the stairs, the young Vigilante waited until the muscles of his arms began to ache. He could not remain in that awkward position for any great length of time.

He began swinging his feet sideways, hoping to touch something on the floor below—a box or barrel. But they struck nothing but empty air. Subconsciously he began counting the number of steps. There were five or six. He could not recall exactly how many. But granting the maximum number, his feet could not be more than a few inches, or a foot at the most, from the floor.

When his muscles had reached a point where he felt he could no longer hold on, he decided to let go and drop to the floor. If he could reach it without making a noise, there was a chance of getting away from the enemy before he could grapple with him. Then it would be a case of hide-and-seek for both of them, with neither having any advantage of the other.

He counted three, and then loosened his grip on the top step. The drop could not have been more than a couple of inches, for Bob's toes touched the floor so suddenly that he was completely surprised and thrown off his guard. The jolt was similar to that experienced by one who, in descending a flight of stairs in the darkness, suddenly finds himself at the bottom instead of one more step from it.

It gave Bob a shock. The noise made by his two heels coming down on the floor echoed through the subcellar. To make matters worse he had stepped on a splinter of a box and snapped it in two. The effect was startling.

Bob should have leaped immediately away from the stairs the moment he touched the bot-

tom. Indeed, that had been his intention, but the unexpected surprise of his fall temporarily disconcerted him. Before he could recover and sneak away, his unknown enemy took advantage of the situation.

There was a swift, silent rush through the darkness, and Bob felt himself carried downward by the impact of a strong, heavy body. A hand sought for his throat and gripped it before he could utter a scream for help. Choking and gurgling, he rolled over, with his enemy on top.

The boy was no match for the burly figure that pinned him to the floor. Indeed, he had n't the faintest shadow of a chance from the first. Taking Bob by surprise, the man had attacked so swiftly and vigorously that the struggle was all in his favor from the beginning.

The cruel hand tightened its grip on the boy's throat until Bob's breath came in little wheezy gasps. In vain he kicked and struggled, but the weight of the body on him held him down so firmly that his efforts were ineffectual.

Bob had a vision of being choked to death in the dark subcellar. It was a horrible end. The

thought frightened him, and the very horror of it suddenly made him quiet. He ceased his struggling and dropped back limp and nerveless.

The relaxation of his muscles must have convinced his adversary that he had nothing further to fear, for the terrible grip on his throat lessened a little, enabling Bob to draw in some air in short, wheezy gasps. For a moment he lay there, his body racked with convulsive spasms.

"Scream, and I'll choke the life out of you!" his enemy hissed, speaking for the first time.

Bob remained quiet. He had no desire to be choked any more. His body lay as limp as a rag on the damp, musty floor.

"I don't know why I don't kill you," growled the man. "I may yet. A dead *Boche* is the only safe *Boche*."

Bob's mind was greatly confused by his physical pain, and for a moment he did not take in the significance of this last remark. A dead *Boche* is the only safe *Boche*! He seemed to repeat it over in his mind. Was he a *Boche*? Was he a German being choked to death by—by—

His mind came back with a rush from its wanderings. Who was his enemy? Was n't he a German? Was n't the man one of the officers or a watchman who had been hiding below to guard the wires? By a supreme effort he swallowed, and then opened his dry lips, and said faintly:

"I 'm not a German."

"Eh!" exclaimed the man. "Not a German?"

Then he laughed unpleasantly, a deep, throaty gurgle that was worse than his growl.

"A trick—a German trick!" he added, tightening his grip. "I 'll kill you for that."

Perhaps he would have put this threat into execution if at that moment the iron door of the sewer had n't opened. Egmont's head was thrust through the opening.

"Bob!" he called softly.

Unconsciously the grip of his enemy's hand tightened until the agony seemed unbearable.

"Bob, where are you?" repeated Egmont.

He held in one hand a lighted candle, which he lifted high over his head so the rays from it spread dimly about the room. But the light did not disclose the faces of the two combatants

nearly as clearly as it did that of the speaker. Egmont's features were plainly visible to both Bob and his enemy.

Complete silence followed—a silence so great that Bob's gasps for breath could be plainly heard. Then suddenly to his surprise and astonishment, the man said in a hoarse whisper:

"Egmont! Egmont, is that you?"

The candle nearly fell out of the boy's hand at the sound of this strange voice in the subcellar. It was not Bob speaking to him, but another, whose voice seemed familiar. He thrust the candle toward the man until it lighted up his features.

"Jean de Chokier!" he exclaimed, with a glad little cry of relief.

"What are you doing here, Jean?" he added. "I thought you were killed or with the army."

"I've been killed a dozen deaths, Egmont, but I'm still alive!" came the reply, accompanied by a soft chuckle. "The *Boches* can't kill Jean de Chokier."

Egmont stared at him, and then thrust the can-

dle downward until it lighted up Bob's white, drawn face.

"Bob!" he exclaimed, giving a start. Then, indignantly, he addressed Jean: "What 're you doing to Bob? You 're choking him! Let him up! Stop it, Jean! Stop it at once! Oh, you 've nearly killed him!"

He sprang through the opening, and tried to push the man off Bob. Jean relaxed his grip and looked stupidly from Egmont to Bob.

"Is he—is he a friend?" he asked in a sheepish voice.

"He 's my American cousin, Bob Lane. Oh, you 've hurt him! You 've nearly killed him. Bob! Bob, speak to me. You 're not dead, are you?"

Bob, gasping for breath, shook his head. He was unable to speak. Assured of his safety, Egmont turned angrily upon the other.

"If you 'd killed him, Jean, I 'd never forgive you. He 's the best friend Belgium has. He—he—"

Bob interrupted by rising to a sitting position.

He was still torn and racked by pain, with his lungs panting for breath; but the unexpected relief from the vise-like grip was so great that he could afford to grin and smile.

"It's all right, Egmont," he whispered. "If Jean's a friend of yours, I don't mind. But he has a powerful grip in that right hand of his. I thought I was done for."

Jean, who had managed to grasp the situation finally, was all contrition.

"I'm sorry," he stammered. "I took you for a *Boche*, and—and—*Je vous demande pardon, monsieur.*"

Bob nodded his head in token of his appreciation of the other's distress.

"It's all right," he murmured. "You nearly got me, but—"

He twisted his neck around, and felt of it with both hands. It was so sore and stiff he wondered if he would ever get the use of it again. Attracted by the noise, Guy d'Assches thrust his head through the opening, and called softly:

"What is it, Egmont? Has anything happened to Bob?"

Before the latter could reply Jean de Chokier gave a little glad cry and sprang toward the speaker.

"Guy, bon ami! Dieu merci!"

To Bob's surprise he flung both arms around Guy and embraced him, and then kissed him on both cheeks. Guy returned the demonstration of enthusiasm with equal fervor.

"How glad I am to see you, Jean!" he said. "We heard you were killed or captured. Charlotte will be delighted. She's been mourning you as dead."

"Charlotte! Dear Charlotte! Tell me about her. She's nearly grown up now, I suppose. It was for her I risked everything. I had to see her. Don't tell me anything dreadful has happened to her." A look of fear came into his face an instant, and did not disappear until Guy had reassured him.

"No, Charlotte's all right. She's home with her grandparents. I think the news you're alive will almost kill her for joy."

"It's a nice way of dying—for joy," replied Jean, smiling and showing a clean set of white

teeth. "I must see her soon. You will help me? I have risked everything to see her. I had to know if she had suffered anything dreadful. Nobody knows what has become of their loved ones back home. Four years I've been away, and I could n't stand it any longer. I had to come."

"You did n't desert, Jean, did you?" asked Egmont, a little sternness creeping into his voice.

The man shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

"A month's furlough, Egmont, after four years in the trenches. Is n't it good that I should use it to come home to see my beloved sister? Oh, I'm crazy to see her!"

"Is he Charlotte de Chokier's brother?" whispered Bob, who had been trying to piece together the snatches of conversation, and make sense out of them.

"Yes," nodded Egmont. "They're brother and sister. When the war broke out Jean joined the army and left Charlotte in the care of their grandparents. They haven't seen each other since."

Bob, who had a special fondness for Charlotte, who throughout the four years of German occupation had stood nobly by her grandparents, encouraging them with her bravery and fortitude, turned to the man who had so recently been choking him, and extended a hand.

"If you're Charlotte's brother," he said, "let me shake hands, Jean. There is n't a nobler girl in Belgium than your sister."

"Nor in the world," was the prompt reply, as the soldier took the proffered hand and squeezed it. Then in a tone of repentance, he added: "I am so sorry I squeezed the throat. I took you for a *Boche*, and I had to act quickly. Does it hurt much?"

"No," laughed Bob, "not now, but you did give it an awful squeeze. I'm glad you're a friend and not an enemy."

"Tell us how you got down here, Jean," Egmont broke in eagerly.

"Listen! Is it safe? They may hear us above."

The noise from above suddenly made them more cautious. Bob rose to his feet. "We

must n't talk any more here," he whispered. "Come down in the sewer, where we'll be safe."

"The sewer!" Jean repeated in surprise. "Oh, does that hole go into the sewer?" He pointed to the opening through which the boys had come.

"Yes, did n't you know it?" Guy answered.

"Not for sure. I stumbled upon the iron door, and tried to open it, but it was locked."

"Why, it was n't locked when we tried to open it," replied Egmont.

Jean grinned. "No, for I had broken the lock. It took me two days and a night. Then when I was ready to go down you—he"—pointing to Bob—"came up. I thought I had been discovered."

"Well," laughed Bob, "everything worked out all right. If we had come sooner we could n't have gotten through, and if we'd come later you'd been gone."

"It opens into the sewer?" Jean queried, looking at the dark hole.

"Yes, the abandoned sewer under the old town. You remember when they put in new sewers this

one was considered too small then, and it was abandoned."

Jean shook his head as he recalled this fact.

"Now come down, and we can talk things over," added Egmont.

They crawled through the opening and carefully closed the iron door behind them. The only thing that disturbed their peace of mind was that the Germans might have their suspicions aroused when they discovered the loss of the padlock. In breaking it Jean may have left a clue behind that might lead to a careful investigation of the wires. But when Bob expressed this fear in words, the Belgian soldier shook his head.

"No, I think not. They seldom come down here. It's the subcellar. They come into the cellar to get wine every day, but not in the subcellar. It's mostly filled with rubbish and empty wine casks."

Safely hidden in the sewer, with no chance of their voices being overheard, they turned to Jean, and began eagerly prying him with questions. The story of how he got into such a hiding-place was no more interesting than the news he could

give them of conditions behind the battle front, where King Albert and his brave soldiers were fighting with the Allies to hold the last corner of Belgium from the invaders.

CHAPTER VI

NEWS FROM THE FRONT

JEAN DE CHOKIER, brother of Charlotte, a bright, plucky girl who lived alone with her grandparents in a big house near the Palais d'Anethan, had fought with that gallant army of Belgians who had retarded the progress of the German hordes from Brussels to Antwerp and from Antwerp to Ypres, and then in desperation had turned upon the enemy in a series of bloody battles to retain the last corner of their beloved country from the invaders. With the aid of the British, they had clung tenaciously to it, repelling attack after attack until the toll of death the Germans were forced to pay shook their morale.

Then had come the winters of trench warfare, relieved in summer by fierce offensives and counter-offensives, which showed little gain of territory for either side. For four bloody years King Albert's army had hung on, refusing to

evacuate the native soil they had sacrificed so much to defend.

Jean had been through a dozen battles. He had been wounded, gassed, and blown up. Once he had been left for dead in No-Man's-Land. One third of the time he had spent in hospitals or in recuperating behind the lines. But apparently nothing could kill him. He surely had what many superstitious soldiers call a charmed life.

"A stiff knee, a little limp, and this scar in the cheek," he added, smiling, when he had briefly sketched his career. "That's all the *Boches* could do to me."

The boys had listened to his stories of adventure in dumb silence, their eyes fairly popping out of their head at times. Jean appreciated his spell-bound audience, and felt quite puffed up by their attention. They knew nothing of war—nothing as he had seen it. Therefore, he could dilate upon some of its excitements and play up the spectacular.

"So," he added, "when I got a month's furlough, I said I'd come home to see my sister. I had n't heard from her or the dear grandparents.

I was n't sure but they were dead, and that Charlotte had been deported to Germany. She must be a big girl now. Four years is a long time."

"Yes, Charlotte's grown," replied Egmont. "You'll hardly know her, Jean. And she's beautiful like all the Chokiers."

"But you have n't told us yet how you got in that cellar," interrupted Guy.

Jean smiled and fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette, and looked forlorn and disappointed when he found none. "It was easy," he nodded, "to crossing Belgium, traveling by night and hiding in the day. I knew the square and all its houses. I had to find a hiding-place. I walked in at night—and suddenly found myself in a nest of *Boches*. They did n't see me, fortunately, and I escaped to the cellar. They were too drunk to recognize me. But it was n't so easy to get out again. I hid there for three days and nights, and then found my way into the subcellar. After that I discovered the iron door. With my knife I pried open the lock, but it was slow work—and, see, I ruined my knife."

Ruefully gazing at the worn, broken blade of

his knife, he held it up for their examination. Spell-bound by the recital of hairbreadth escapes and the remarkable coincidence that had brought them to the cellar where he was hiding, the boys sat in silence a moment, hoping he would continue. They sighed when he lapsed into silence.

"What news do you bring from the front, Jean?" Guy asked finally. "Is the Belgian army all cut to pieces?"

"No, no, they're stronger than ever. The king and queen are with them, and they will fight to the last. They will never surrender. Nothing can demoralize them. *Vive la Belgique!*"

"The Germans have spread stories in Brussels that they wanted to surrender, but the British would n't let them. It's always the English!" Egmont spoke bitterly. "But I did n't believe it. I knew it was a German lie!"

"Surrender! Piff! They'll never surrender. And now the Americans are coming—coming like flies—millions of them!"

"Have you seen them—the American soldiers?" interrupted Bob, eagerly. "You know I

am an American—my father was an American, and I was born in America.”

“Yes, I have seen them, the Americans, fine, big, husky boys, and so kind and thoughtful! They will drive the *Boches* across the Rhine. Their coming has cheered us. It is big news I bring home. You must tell the people to have heart, and wait a little longer.”

“We’ve done that already—spread the news from Liège to Antwerp, and from Brussels to Bruges,” replied Bob, smiling.

Jean looked stupidly at him, puzzled and curious.

“Jean has n’t heard of the Vigilantes, Bob,” laughed Egmont. “Tell him.”

It was the soldier’s turn to listen with bated breath and flushed cheeks as Bob related briefly the work of the organization the boys had formed, outlining their purpose and the spread of the idea all over Belgium. When he was through, Jean extended his hands in expression of his emotion.

“Now I know the spirit of Belgium will never

be crushed!" he exclaimed. "The boys of Belgium! What is it you call yourself—Vigilantes! Ah! what a fine name! The king must know of them. I shall have the pleasure of telling him and our dear queen when I go back."

"When are you going back, Jean?" asked Guy anxiously. "Do you think you can get through the German lines?"

"Like a knife going through cheese. They can't catch Jean de Chokier. But when do I go? After I have seen my dear sister. I must embrace her first. I've come all the way to gaze into her fine eyes and to kiss her rosy cheeks. I must go to her soon."

He rose suddenly from his seat and began pacing the dry floor of the sewer.

"Perhaps it will be safer to bring Charlotte here, Jean," Bob suggested. "We could smuggle her down here easily, dressed up as a boy. She doesn't go out much now. It isn't safe, you know."

Jean stopped and gazed inquiringly at Bob, who flushed, and then added:

"Charlotte's grown a good deal since you saw

her, Jean. She's a mighty pretty girl now, and big for her age. The German officers like pretty faces, and most of the girls over fourteen have been taken into Germany."

Something like an oath escaped the soldier's lips, and with clenched hands and blazing eyes he stamped his foot. "The *Boches!* The Huns! If they dare lay hands on my sister!"

His sudden anger was natural, but after it had expended itself, he grew calmer and more reasonable. He knew how futile his defiance of the invaders would prove in a test. What could he do alone against a host of Germans in defending Charlotte?

He began pacing the floor again in agitated strides. Bob hadn't exaggerated the danger threatening Charlotte, for they knew from her own lips that she had kept herself secluded in her home for fear of insults on the street from the German officers. And all the time, hanging over her head like a nightmare, was the terrible fear that she might be seized any day and carried off to Germany as many other girls and young women had been.

Jean was thinking deeply, planning in his own mind how to help his sister, although outwardly he appeared as belligerent and defiant as ever. The boys watched him in silence, sympathizing with him. Finally, he stopped in front of them.

"There's only one thing to do," he announced in a quiet voice. "Charlotte must go back with me."

Every one looked up with startled eyes.

"She'd never get across Belgium with you, Jean," replied Egmont, shaking his head. "You might do it alone, but not with Charlotte. She'd attract too much attention."

"You just said you'd dress her up as a boy and bring her to see me," was the smiling retort. "Then why as a boy can she not go with me?"

Bob shook his head.

"Even as a boy she would n't be safe, Jean. She's taller than Egmont."

"Eh! Well, what of that?"

"Don't you know the Germans are deporting all boys big enough to work in the mines and

factories? Charlotte would be seized if seen. Egmont and I don't feel any too safe. They may take us before long. We've been considering how we could escape before it's too late. We're going to send the word out to the Vigilantes to advise all the older boys to leave the country—not together, but singly. Some may escape and join King Albert's army."

"It is a fine plan!" exclaimed Jean. "They will make good soldiers, these Vigilantes. Yes, yes, tell them to get out of Belgium. I myself will help them."

In his enthusiasm at the idea he forgot Charlotte, and was reminded of it only when Bob added:

"So you see, Jean, it would n't be safe to attempt to smuggle Charlotte out of Belgium dressed as a boy."

Jean frowned in perplexity, and once more began his restless pacing to and fro. But gradually his face cleared, and a crafty smile succeeded the lines of depression.

"It is the old women that the *Boches* don't

disturb," he remarked suddenly, stopping again. "They don't want them—the women too old to work. Is that not so?"

The boys nodded. The old men and women were safer than even the small boys and girls, for their days of usefulness had gone, and the Germans could not use them now or in the future.

"Then," added Jean, swelling out his chest, "Charlotte shall be an old woman, and I shall go as her husband, the old man who cannot walk straight. See, I show you."

Crooking his back and bending forward like an old man scarcely able to walk, he crossed the narrow space in perfect imitation of the aged. "I shall carry a stick to lean on," he went on gleefully, "and a bundle of old rags. And Charlotte shall cling to me like a woman who's partly paralyzed. She's a fine actress, my sister. Remember, Egmont, when she played the part of an old woman at the Kirmesse dance? Ah! she will know how to do it."

His suggestive words and actions amused them. They caught his idea at once. With himself and Charlotte disguised as an old couple,

they could cross Belgium without danger unless some over-inquisitive German discovered their deception.

"I believe you could do it!" exclaimed Bob, finally, clapping his hands softly. "Yes, Charlotte could play the part of an old woman to perfection. But she'd have to cut off her beautiful long hair."

The girl had an abundance of long silky black hair that fell below her waist, and Bob was thinking of how it would hurt to sacrifice such a lovely possession: but the loss of it would be nothing to the heart-rending sorrows that would befall her if she were deported to Germany.

"Yes," nodded Jean, "the hair would have to come off, but Charlotte would agree to it. She'd have to. It's her only chance of getting across Belgium."

Jean's proposition seemed more reasonable the longer they dwelt upon it. Guy and Egmont were a little doubtful at first, but Bob's ready acceptance of the plan convinced them.

"Charlotte can make herself up at home and come here in disguise as an old woman," Guy

said. "She 'll need paint and false hair and a lot of things."

"And her grandmother's old dresses," added Egmont. "She can make the transformation before she leaves home."

"And I 'll wear some of grandfather's old clothes," broke in Jean. "How am I to get them?"

"We 'll bring them to you," replied Egmont.

"No, I 'll go home and get them," was the short answer.

"It would n't be safe, Jean," interrupted Guy. "In that uniform you 'd be arrested or shot on sight."

"I crossed Belgium in it," stoutly proclaimed the soldier, swelling out his chest in pride.

"Yes, but Brussels is different. The soldiers are on guard at every corner. They 'd challenge you every few yards."

"I 'm used to that," Jean added stubbornly. "I 'm not afraid of their challenges."

It required considerable persuasion from all three to convince him finally that in the interest of his own safety and Charlotte's he should re-

main in the sewer until the boys smuggled old clothes to him. Then dressed up as an old, decrepit man he might venture forth after dark without fear of capture.

He yielded after a while, promising to keep under cover until after dark. The boys were to return early in the evening, each bringing some particular garment to make up his complete outfit. As it always aroused suspicion to be seen carrying a bundle on the streets of Brussels, they decided to divide the articles between them, as they could readily conceal them under their jackets.

After a few more preliminary discussions of the scheme, they dispersed, Bob leaving the sewer by way of the south canal as he had entered, and Egmont and Guy retracing their steps north and east to reach the streets some distance apart. By such unusual precaution they never gave the sentries a chance to suspect they had a common meeting-place under the very city itself.

Bob, having started first, reached the home of the Chokiers ahead of his companions. When

he was admitted, he asked for Charlotte, and was conducted into an upper room where a few moments later the girl appeared.

Bob's first glimpse of her startled him. The face was pale and drawn, and the eyes full of fear and nervousness. She came toward him with a sigh of relief. "I did n't know who it was, Bob," she murmured in a trembling voice. "I was afraid—afraid of—"

"What were you afraid of, Charlotte?" he asked, noticing her agitation.

She was a tall, queenly looking girl, well developed, and with deep, liquid eyes, which just now were so startled they seemed to burn with wonderful brilliance.

"The German officers, Bob," she whispered. "I was stopped by one on the street, and—and— Oh, I got away from him and ran home! I think—I think—it is n't safe for me to go out any more. They may take me to Germany. Do you think there's any danger of it?"

The wistful, appealing eyes made him wince. He understood in an instant the cause of her distress. The terrible fate that had come to so many

of Belgium's fairest daughters hung over her head like a horrible nightmare. The very thought of being deported to Germany was enough to drive a high-strung girl like Charlotte insane. His heart bled for her.

Then his mission to the house occurred to him, and with it came a great relief. The good news he brought about her brother would put new heart in her and banish the fear from her eyes.

"No, Charlotte, there is no danger," he replied, smiling encouragingly into her face. "No danger whatever."

"You think so? Why do you say that?"

"Because, Charlotte, I've got good news for you—splendid news. When you hear it you'll—"

"What is it?" she interrupted. "Tell me quick!"

"No, not until Egmont and Guy come," he replied. "It is n't fair to be selfish and tell you before they arrive. But you won't have to wait long. I hear them now. Yes, that's Egmont's voice—and Guy's. I beat them only by half a minute. I knew they would hurry."

CHAPTER VII

CHARLOTTE'S DANGER

THE unexpected appearance of Guy and Egmont so shortly after Bob's arrival, specially in view of the latter's remarks, piqued Charlotte's curiosity, and at the same time aroused her mind to great expectations. For a few moments she forgot the subject that was troubling her, as she turned to the boys with a smiling face and laughing eyes.

"What 's the meaning of all this? It must be some great secret or a pleasant surprise."

"It is," replied Bob. "Ask Guy or Egmont."

"Well, I 'm waiting," said Charlotte. "Why don't you tell me?"

"If Bob has n't already told you," interrupted Egmont, "he deserves a medal. I 'm sure I could n't have kept the news from you a minute."

"I wanted you and Guy to be present," replied Bob. "It 's too good for one to enjoy alone."

"Is this a species of torture you're putting me to?" inquired Charlotte. "If it is please go on with it. I quite enjoy it. No, I'm not a bit curious. In fact, I begin to believe there's no secret, or any good news. I don't believe any good news will ever come to Belgium again." The last sentence contained a note of sorrow that made the boys instantly serious. Bob spoke for the others.

"We're in earnest, Charlotte," he said. "We have good news for you. Now what is your greatest wish in life?"

"That Germany shall be whipped and driven out of Belgium!" came the quick, sharp retort, accompanied by flashing eyes and clenching of small hands.

"Yes, of course," stammered Bob. "That's the wish of all of us. But I mean a personal wish. What wish would make you the most happy?"

Charlotte frowned and knit her forehead. Once more she was thinking of her danger, and Bob seemed to read her thoughts. "Isn't there somebody above all others you would like to see?"

he added, hoping to direct her mind in the right channel.

"Why,"—she began, and then stopped. She glanced from one boy to the other, her eyes dilating, her hands trembling in agitation. "You—you have n't heard from Jean, have you?" she added a moment later in a voice that shook.

"Yes," they answered in unison.

The girl sprang toward them.

"Is he alive?" she demanded quickly. "Is he safe? Where is he?"

"He 's alive, Charlotte," replied Egmont, "and safe. And he 's here—in Brussels!"

"Alive—safe—and here in Brussels!" the girl repeated, as if unable to believe the news.

"Yes, we left him half an hour ago," continued Egmont. "He sent his love to you. He 's anxious to greet you, and—"

"Where is he?" she interrupted impetuously. "Take me to him! I must see him at once—dear Jean! Oh, this is good news—better than I ever dreamed. I will go to him at once."

"Not just now, and as you are, Charlotte," Bob explained. "It would be dangerous. You just

said the German officers had been bothering you again, and you had to run to escape them. If you went out after dark it would be extremely dangerous."

"Yes, I know, but I must see my brother. I'll risk anything for that. He needs me as much as I do him. Oh, it's four long years since we parted! I can't wait another minute."

"Jean is coming here," Guy interrupted. "We're going to take your grandfather's old clothes to him and dress him up as an old man. You must help us to select them. He said the older the clothes the better. It is n't any safer for him to appear without a disguise than you."

"No, he must n't be caught!" she exclaimed. "They'd shoot him! He must be very careful. Do you think it's safe even if he's disguised?" she asked anxiously.

"Jean crossed half of Belgium without a disguise," replied Bob, "and I don't think he'll get caught when he travels as an old man. I wonder," he added, speaking slowly, and looking meaningly at the girl, "if you could n't disguise yourself as an old woman and go back with him."

"Go back with Jean?" she asked, looking puzzled. "Where is Jean going?"

"Back to the army—back of the battle front, where you would be in no further danger of being deported to Germany. Once there you would be safe until the end of the war."

Charlotte gazed at him in silence, as if trying to grasp the purport of his words, and while her mind was still in a little daze Bob continued:

"It's Jean's suggestion. He does n't want to leave you behind. He's afraid you might be taken by the Huns and sent to Germany. With you in disguise as an old woman, and he as an old man, he thinks there's a good chance for both of you to escape. Once beyond Ypres with the Belgian Army, you would be perfectly safe."

"Yes, I would be safe, and with Jean," the girl replied slowly. "And I want to go, but dear grandmother and grandfather—what would they do without me? Would they let me go?"

Neither of the boys had thought of this possible obstacle to their plans, and they looked blankly at Charlotte, who in turn stared at them and then quietly dropped her eyes to the floor,

with a sigh, as if the question was too deep for her.

But fortunately the awkward silence was broken by a slight movement behind them, and when they turned around they stood face to face with a little old lady dressed in a simple, but quaint, costume, with a beautiful piece of lace adorning her white hair.

"My dears, I could n't help overhearing you," Madame de Chokier said, smiling at their looks of surprise. "I was taking my nap when you entered, and I could n't leave without disturbing you. So I decided to sit still until you left."

"Oh, Grandmother, then you heard the glorious news!" exclaimed Charlotte, rushing forward and embracing her. "Jean is alive and safe. He's in Brussels, and is coming home to us!"

"Yes, dear, I heard all that, and also that he wanted to take you away from us," was the smiling reply.

"But I won't go, Grandmother, not if you want me to stay. You heard me tell them that."

The old lady kissed each cheek of the speaker, and smiled bravely into her face.

"I heard everything, Charlotte," she replied, holding the pretty face between her old hands. "And it made me happy to think my granddaughter would sacrifice her happiness, and perhaps her life, for the sake of those who are too old to have much to live for. Your grandfather and I can afford to smile and be happy even in the face of the terrible trials of our beloved country when such grandchildren bless them. Ah, my dear, life is not hopeless! I shall continue to bless the good God, and trust in him."

"I won't leave you, Grandmother," Charlotte whispered. "I'll stay with you until this horrible war is over."

"No, my child, I could n't permit that," was the answer. "Jean is right. You should go with him. It is n't safe for you to stay in Belgium any longer."

"But you and grandfather—"

"Will look after each other. We've done it for fifty years, and it will be no novelty to us."

"But—" began Charlotte again, and stopped before the shaking head of her grandparent.

"We can listen to no protests, Charlotte. Your

grandfather, I know, will be just as positive, and will insist upon your going. Listen, child, I will whisper a secret in your ears. Night after night we have lain awake, dreading and fearing the terrible thing that we knew would visit our home in time. We've watched you grow, and each inch you've gained has stabbed us to the heart. We saw how beautiful you were becoming, and your beauty was a curse rather than a blessing to us. We cowed and shivered before the thought of your being seized and deported to Germany. It has been our nightmare—our burden, which we felt we could not bear—our secret, which we did not dare whisper to you. Oh, my dear Charlotte, don't you see it's God's helping hand? He has sent Jean to take you away to a place of safety."

Charlotte and the boys stood in awed silence for a moment, for Madame de Chokier had spoken with deep emotion, her lips quivering, her moist eyes bright and sparkling. Charlotte embraced her again, and murmured:

"I did n't know you had worried about me, Grandmother. I thought you did n't know."

"I've known everything, dear child, your fear

of going on the street, and your nervous terror when they seized others. I saw your eyes when you came in a few minutes ago. I knew what had happened. Oh, Charlotte, I've suffered as Belgian mothers have suffered when they saw their children torn from their arms to serve that beast in Berlin! May God punish him to the full for all his unspeakable crimes!"

With tears in her own eyes, Charlotte took one of the shaking hands in both of hers and held it tenderly.

"I'll go with Jean, Grandmother," she said gently. "Yes, you'll be happier with me gone. When the war's over I'll come back. Promise you and grandfather will keep up your courage and wait for me. Don't let anything cause you to despair. I'm coming back—coming back to make you happy again. Promise me!"

"Yes, dear, I'll promise to wait patiently, and to pray for you every day. I shall have something to live for, and that will keep me brave and trustful."

The boys had withdrawn to a corner of the room to leave the couple alone together, but

Madame de Chokier now turned to them. "These are the young Knight Errants of Belgium," she said, smiling through her tears. "Verily I believe the spirit of our boys is equal to that of their brave fathers. Belgium can never die so long as its sons have faith and courage." She came toward them and extended both hands. Guy looked up and smiled.

"You mean young Vigilantes and not Knight Errants," he blurted out unthinkingly.

"Vigilantes! I don't know that name," murmured Madame de Chokier, shaking her head. "What are they?"

Bob and Egmont darted a glance at Guy that made him flush with embarrassment. They had purposely kept all knowledge of their society from the older people, for fear that if the German spies discovered anything, they might torture the parents and grandparents to exact confession from them, and then visit cruel punishment upon them for harboring traitors. A part of the boys' creed had been to do nothing that would incriminate their elders.

"Oh, that's a name of a society they have in

America," Guy replied, hoping to divert her curiosity. "Bob's been telling us about it. Some day he may tell you."

"Yes, some day he can tell me," murmured Madame de Chokier, absently. "I shall be glad to hear anything he can tell me about that wonderful country. But just now we must think of other things. You wanted old clothes for Jean—something old and ragged? Well, we'll go and search for them. I think I know where to find them."

"And a wig if you have one—an old man's wig," said Egmont.

"A wig for Jean!" chuckled the little old lady. "I wonder what he will look like in one. Jean always was trying to disguise himself. He should have been an actor."

She led the way out of the room, and ascended the stairs to another floor above, the others following close behind her. When she came to the door of a room that was locked, she produced a key, and asked Charlotte to open it. It was close and musty inside, for the room was a narrow one, with only one small window opening into it. Madame

de Chokier raised the curtain to admit the waning light of the departing day.

"Open that trunk, Charlotte," she said, indicating an old wooden chest with her cane. "It's filled with clothes that I never expected to use again—and wigs too."

The girl obeyed, and when the lid was raised, a queer collection of old clothes and fancy dresses was revealed. Some were made of fine silks and linen, with elaborate lace and embroidery, and others of cheap cotton and wool, with no pretense whatever to ornament or decoration. Indeed, some of the latter seemed almost ready to fall to pieces when Charlotte lifted them out, so old and ragged were they.

"Take the poorest of them," Madame de Chokier said, chuckling. "The poorer one dresses, the less interest the Germans take in the wearer!"

"Where did you get such quaint old clothes, Grandmother?" asked Charlotte. "And why are you keeping them stored up here?"

"They belonged to your grandfather and me when we were first married, dear," was the reply. "We were poor then—very poor—almost as poor

as we are now that the Germans have taken everything from us. They did n't want these. They looked at them and told me I could keep them. They despised our very wedding clothes. Well, they may be rags, but they 're precious to us."

She lifted one of the dresses from the trunk and held it up for them to see. It was a cheap peasant dress that brought smiles to their faces.

"That 's for Charlotte," she said. "I never thought she 'd ever wear it, but the world is turned upside down, and princesses dress in rags and great men in paupers' clothes. Try it on, dear, and see if it fits." She dug deep into the mass of clothing again and brought forth a peasant's suit for a man. "Your grandfather's, dear, when he was younger than he is now," she added. "It ought to fit Jean."

The odd clothes she fished out of the trunk excited no end of merriment, and before she reached the bottom they were laughing and talking as if they were preparing for a masquerade instead of a serious adventure.

Madame de Chokier brought out last a collection of wigs and false mustaches and beards.

"These," she said, "Charles wore at our first masquerade. They're a little old and moth-eaten, but we can fix them up for Jean. He can take his choice of them. He'll know best which ones to use. Who will carry these to him?"

"I will!" exclaimed Guy, seizing them and adjusting one after another to his face and head.

"Then, Egmont, you can take the coat," she added, handing him that article of dress. "And you, Bob, can carry the trousers. The rest you will have to divide among you as best you can."

They selected a complete wardrobe for Jean, and began concealing them about their persons so as not to excite suspicion on the street. Charlotte was so busy studying out her own wardrobe that she ignored them. Bob finally announced he was ready.

"It's dark now, and we must get back to the sewer," he said.

"The sewer!" exclaimed Charlotte, raising her head.

"Yes," was the smiling retort. "That's where we left Jean. But," he added, when he saw the girl shudder, "it's a dry sewer, an old abandoned

one, and quite comfortable for a hiding-place. And it 's big enough for Jean to dress in. We 'll have him here within an hour, for he 's crazy to get home to see you."

CHAPTER VIII

CHARLOTTE AND JEAN ESCAPE

IT was dark when the boys emerged from the house, and skulked along the street, fearful of attracting attention to the small bundles they concealed under their coats. As on all occasions, they left the house singly and not together, taking different directions to throw any spy, who might be watching them, off the trail.

They met in their old rendezvous twenty minutes later, where they found Jean impatiently waiting for them. He seized the different articles of clothing, and quickly discarded his battered uniform. By the flickering light of the candles, he made a remarkable transformation in his appearance.

“Pardon, messieurs, a bite of food for a poor old man,” he said, hobbling up to them in his new disguise, with one hand extended.

The imitation was so perfect they suppressed their shouts of approval by smothering their lips with both hands.

"You'll do, Jean!" whispered Bob. "No *Boche* will guess you're anything but an old beggar."

"Then I must be off. I want to see Charlotte and the grandparents."

They led the way to the nearest exit, and told him the street the canal crossed. Then they separated and made their way back to the home of the Chokiers by devious routes.

Jean, in his eagerness, reached the house first, but Bob was only half a minute behind him. He entered the house just as brother and sister met. Charlotte stood a moment in dubious amazement until Jean, with a glad little laugh, threw off his wig and rushed toward her.

"Charlotte, *ma chère sœur!*" he cried, flinging his arms about her in an affectionate embrace.

"Oh, Jean, I did n't know you at first!" she replied, laughing and crying in the same breath. "I thought maybe you were a German spy. You can never tell, you know. They're everywhere."

"Yes, and we can't be too careful. But how are the grandparents?"

"They're here to speak for themselves," replied Charlotte, as Madame de Chokier and her husband entered the room.

Bob retreated and made his way to the stairway to let Guy and Egmont in. The greeting of the united family greatly affected him, and for a moment he felt a terrible loneliness in his own heart. It was four years since he had seen his own mother, and a great yearning to gaze into her eyes and face brought the tears to his eyes.

"Dear mother, she must be worrying about me," he said. "I wish I could see her right away."

The entrance of Guy and Egmont dispelled all homesickness from his mind. "Is Jean here?" they first asked.

"Yes," nodded Bob. "He's with Charlotte and his grandparents. Better wait here until they've had time to talk over family affairs."

They waited below until a head protruded over the railing above, and Charlotte called to them. "Are you planning more mysteries down there?" she asked mockingly. "I believe you're always

thinking up some schemes. If you can spare the time you might come up and help me prepare my disguise."

Charlotte was already dressed in her simple peasant's gown of antique date, with a wig of dirty white hair covering her head. She bobbed her body up and down in mock courtesy.

"How do you like it?" she asked, smiling.

Bob shook his head sadly.

"Your face gives you away, Charlotte. In spite of the wig you look young and pretty."

"Thanks for the compliment, Bob, but I really feel as old as the dress."

"You 'll have to cut off your hair, Charlotte," said Guy. "It gives you away in spite of the wig."

"Must I?" she asked in dismay.

"Yes, dear," chimed in Jean, "but it will grow again. It's beautiful hair," he added, kissing it, "but it must come off."

"Then I 'll cut it at once." She seized a pair of scissors and snipped at the long tresses until they lay in a dark glistening heap on the floor. A glance at herself in the mirror almost frightened

her, and to conceal the reflection from her eyes she clapped on the wig. The others looked critically at her.

Bob was still dissatisfied.

"The face must be changed," he said.

"Sure!" exclaimed Jean. "It is too pretty. Here, let me show you." He showed himself to be a past master in making up for theatricals. With some burnt cork he changed the soft white complexion to a dirty yellow and brown, and then with some grease and paints began tracing lines of wrinkles in the cheeks, around the mouth and under the eyes. The others watched him in silent amazement. When he had finished, they clapped their hands with approval.

Charlotte was no longer the beautiful girl they had been accustomed to see, but an old, wrinkled woman, with white hair straggling over her forehead and face. In her peasant's garb she was a perfect make-up.

"There! Who would know my beautiful sister!" exclaimed Jean, in triumph. "No, she is my wife—my old woman."

He began applying the burnt cork and paints

to his own face until his whole expression was changed. Then hobbling across the floor by her side, leaning heavily on his cane, he made her imitate the character she represented. The rehearsal was continued for some time amidst many critical remarks and shouts of laughter.

"Now we're ready to sally forth," Jean added. "We must get out of Brussels before daylight. Once in the country we can hide in the day and travel after dark."

When they came to the moment of departure every one was serious, for the adventure the young couple were embarking upon contained many dangers and risks, and Madame de Chokier and her husband were not deceived. Even if Charlotte and Jean escaped the Germans, it might be a long time before the family would be reunited again. Not until after the war could they hope to return to Belgium.

But the adventure had not been hastily planned or lightly conceived. It was the only thing to do, and the old couple retained their calm self-possession admirably. They kissed the two repeat-

edly, and then bade them God-speed on their journey.

They left the house together, the boys stationing themselves in front to see if the street was deserted. Then, with a final whispered adieu they vanished in the darkness.

"I hope they 'll get out of Brussels before morning," Bob said. "If they do, Jean can manage the rest."

"It will be lonely without Charlotte," remarked Egmont. "I almost wish I was going with them."

"It will be lonelier for their grandparents," chimed in Guy. "We must do everything to console them."

"Yes," admitted Bob, "until they get used to it they will be terribly lonely."

Instead of leaving for their homes at once, they returned to the house. Madame de Chokier received them as calmly as if nothing had occurred to break the serenity of the family life.

"We must place our trust in the good God," she said reverently. "I believe He will watch over them, my poor little lambs!"

The boys remained for several hours, hoping to make up for the loss the old couple had sustained by talking of ordinary events in the city. It was growing well toward midnight when they decided to leave. "They should be out of Brussels by this time," Bob remarked. "They've had time enough."

"Yes, thank God, they've gone!" murmured their hostess. "I shall always be glad I sent them before it was too late. It nearly wrenched my heart to let them go, and they will never know the loneliness of a poor old woman—"

She stopped in the midst of her sentence, for a loud knocking and clattering on the street door echoed through the spacious rooms and halls.

"What is that?" whispered Guy.

"Some one demanding admission," murmured Madame de Chokier. Then turning to her husband, she added: "Charles, will you see who our late visitor is? By his clamoring he seems very impatient."

One thought gripped the hearts of every one, and made them tremble. Had something happened to Jean and Charlotte? Had they been

caught and brought back? Even Monsieur and Madame de Chokier could not suppress their fear, and together they descended the stairway and moved toward the door on which the violent rapping was still being made. The boys did not linger in the background, but accompanied them.

When Monsieur de Chokier opened the door, three figures entered abruptly, pushing their way in and giving the door a kick with their feet. The foremost was a Prussian officer, arrogant and impudent; the second, an armed soldier; and the third, a German in civilian dress. Before this array of German authority, the old couple and their three guests retreated a few steps in evident dismay.

The Prussian officer surveyed them coolly, and then the hall and broad stairway. Without a word to them, as if they were beneath him and unworthy of noticing, he turned to his two companions.

"Search the house!" he ordered. "I'll wait for you here."

The soldier and civilian obeyed with alacrity, springing up the stairs with quick, eager steps,

while the officer bestrode a chair, and gazed calmly at nothing. After a while he lighted a cigarette, and blew clouds of smoke in the air. Monsieur de Chokier was the first to break the silence. With calm dignity, he asked:

"Why is my house invaded at this late hour? I do not understand it."

"Monsieur will know in time," was the curt reply. "For the present do not disturb me with questions."

He returned to his smoking, enjoying their consternation as much as he did the curling wreaths of smoke puffed from his lips. Silence under such circumstances was really a more terrifying species of torment than open accusations, and the officer appeared greatly amused by the mystery his entrance had created.

"Be seated, Charles," Madame de Chokier said calmly, taking a chair for herself, "and make yourself comfortable. It may be a long wait."

The officer cast her an angry look, and seemed on the point of resenting her remark, but when they drew chairs together and quietly took them,

side by side, he changed his mind. The boys had retreated as far across the hall as possible, and stood in a row against the opposite wall. The officer gave them a haughty look, and smiled.

"How old are you?" he asked, indicating Bob with a wave of the hand.

"Thirteen," came the quiet response.

"Every Belgian boy lies about his age!" was the cool retort. "They 're never over thirteen until they 're twenty."

An angry flush came into Bob's cheeks, but he was not allowed to retort. The two searchers were heard coming down the broad stairway. When they appeared, the Prussian officer rose quickly from his seat, and snapped out:

"Where is she? Why did n't you bring her?"

"She 's not in the house," replied the one in civilian dress. "We 've searched every part of it."

An exclamation of anger escaped the lips of the officer, and in forcible German he began berating the man for his stupidity. From his remarks, the boys gathered that he was a German

spy attached to the intelligence department, and that he had, under instructions from higher authorities, been watching the house.

"Stupid pig!" the Prussian ended in disgust. "Either you let her escape under your eyes or she's hiding in the house. I will try my hand at searching. You will stay here."

He strode up the stairway and disappeared from view. The soldier stationed himself near the doorway in the attitude of a wooden sentry, who knew nothing more than that he had to guard the door and keep any one from going in or out except over his dead body. The other took the chair vacated by his superior, and calmly waited results.

The officer was gone a long time. They could hear him thumping and pounding the walls above, throwing contents of closets out on the floor, smashing trunks and boxes, and wrecking any place that could conceal a person. It was nearly half an hour before he returned, his face flushed with anger and disappointment. He strode up to the aged couple.

"Where have you hidden this girl of yours—

daughter or granddaughter? Speak the truth!"

Madame de Chokier smiled cheerfully.

"We have not hidden her," she replied truthfully. "She's not in the house. If you had asked me before I could have saved you all this search."

"Not in the house!" shouted the Prussian. "Then where is she? Tell me the truth or in prison you'll go!"

"She's gone hours ago."

"Where?"

"Out of Brussels. I could not say where. I could not find her if I wanted to."

"You lie!" was the impudent retort. "You're concealing her."

"If that is so, find her," was the smiling reply.

The officer ground his teeth in rage, and turned to Monsieur de Chokier. "I'll give you a chance to tell the truth," he added. "If you lie to me you'll go to prison."

"There is nothing to lie about," replied Charlotte's grandfather with quiet dignity. "My granddaughter left this house hours ago. By this time she should be out of the city."

The officer raised a hand as if to strike the speaker, and then reconsidered his act.

"When will she return?" he asked, changing his tactics.

"I could not say just when, but the very day the Germans leave Belgium she'll return to her home."

"Then she'll never come back," mocked the man, laughing.

"I disagree with you there, Monsieur. The day may be long, but it will come."

The reply increased the officer's anger, but instead of retorting, he wheeled and faced the boys. A crafty smile came to his lips. He stared at each in turn, vainly trying to intimidate them with a look. Having, from his point of view, properly frightened them, he said in a slow drawl:

"Will you tell me the truth or must I arrest you and force it from you? Where is the pretty young granddaughter of this old couple?" He glanced first at Bob, who shook his head, and murmured:

"I do not know."

Shrugging his shoulders, the man turned next

to Egmont, who repeated Bob's words. Guy had the last chance, and proved no more tractable than the others. The officer shrugged his shoulders.

"Arrest them!" he said, addressing the soldier at the door. "Take them along with us."

"And you," he added sneeringly to the one dressed in civilian clothes, "watch the house on the outside, and don't go to sleep again. I'll hold you responsible."

The sentry at the door advanced with fixed bayonet, and ordered the boys to precede him. Madame de Chokier half rose to protest, but Bob shook his head at her meaningly, and she dropped back with a sigh.

CHAPTER IX

BOB ARRESTED AS A SPY

THEIR sudden arrest came so unexpectedly that neither one of the young prisoners was able to take in its full significance until they had been hustled from the house at the point of the soldier's bayonet. The officer who had given the order strode triumphantly along in their rear.

Once out in the clear night air, with the streets darkened, and a distant clock ringing the hour of midnight, the boys partly recovered from their stupor, and began to wonder what would be done to them. Their arrest, so far as they had been informed, was for the distinct purpose of trying to force from them some information concerning Charlotte; but from past experiences of the inhabitants they knew that one might be arrested on one charge and have to face another entirely different when finally brought to trial.

Then, too, there was the danger of being thrown into a military prison, and held indefinitely before being tried. It was a common practice. Personal grudges of individual officers against unoffending citizens had been satisfied in this way. Final acquittal of any crime did not repay one for the sufferings and tortures of long confinement.

Naturally, after they had somewhat recovered from their surprise and stupefaction, the thought of breaking away from their guard and escaping occurred simultaneously to each one of the boys. It would not be so difficult in the darkness. They could make a break and scatter in every direction.

The soldier, of course, would shoot at them, but his chances of hitting one was very slim. Bob, as if thinking of such a scheme, turned and glanced in the direction of the officer. The latter was smiling grimly, a hand on his pistol holster.

It flashed across Bob's mind that this was just what the man wanted the boys to do—attempt to break away from their guard and make a dash for liberty. It would be great sport for him to shoot at the scurrying boys. As an officer he would be a much better shot than the stupid sentry, and per-

haps would disable or kill one or more of them.

Resisting arrest, or breaking away from a guard when under escort, was a crime which would justify the Prussian in shooting to kill. With no definite charges against them, they would be inviting disaster to resist. Bob nudged Egmont, and murmured:

"No, don't try to get away. Come along quietly."

"We could do it," whispered Guy. "That stupid soldier can't shoot straight."

"No, but the officer's watching us, and he's got his pistol ready."

They walked along quietly and meekly after that until they came to a deserted square. No citizens were allowed out at such an hour of the night, and with the exception of a pacing sentry at regular intervals, the place was deadly quiet and lonely. Their chances of breaking away from their guard had disappeared the moment they reached the square, for there was much better light here and a sentry was stationed on every corner. The officer gave the word to halt, and while the guard stood with fixed bayonet, he ap-

proached the boys and surveyed them with smiling eyes.

"You want to spend the night in the guard-house?" he queried, folding his arms. "It is a pleasant place for boys. Keeps them out of mischief. You'll get bread and water for breakfast, and then the commandant will have you up, and if he says so, you go to prison—or to Germany."

They mutely watched him and waited for him to proceed. Taking their silence for fear, he continued:

"We need boys like you to work in Germany. We pay good wages and give you plenty to eat. The girls, too, they have fine homes and beautiful clothes. This cousin of yours—or is it a sister?"

Bob shook his head.

"Neither," he replied. "I have no sister or cousin, except Egmont here."

"Then she is your sister or cousin," the officer added, addressing Guy, who shook his head, and responded with a brief negative. The Prussian meditated in silence, glancing sharply from one to the other as if debating in his mind how truthful his young prisoners were.

"Then if she's neither cousin nor sister to any of you," he added after a pause, smiling in a friendly way, "you may tell me where she's hiding. I shall have a good reward for you. Let me see what I can promise. Oh, it shall be that you will not have to go to work in Germany. I shall speak to the commandant."

There was inviting suggestiveness in the voice and manner, very different from his former bullying; but even had the boys any desire to save their skins at the expense of Charlotte's safety, they would not have been deceived. Belgium had had too many lessons of treachery to trust any one of its invaders no matter in what flattering words a promise of immunity was presented. They shook their heads slowly, almost in unison, as if animated by the same thought. "We don't know where she is," Bob spoke. "Not to save our lives could we tell you."

"Impossible!" snapped the officer. "She was in that house to-night. I myself saw her run in it. Then how did she get out of it?"

"Walked out," replied Bob, calmly. "I saw her go myself."

"Where is she hiding then?" was the next question.

"I don't know where she is now," was the truthful retort. "She left Brussels, or hoped to before morning. That's all I know about her hiding-place."

The officer muttered a growl of disappointment, and once more turned to his old bullying, threatening manners.

"If you're lying to me," he began, "I'll have you sent to Germany. You're old enough to work," he added, staring at Bob. "Yes, you're over fourteen."

"No, thirteen!"

"That is for the commandant to say," was the sneering reply. "I shall put you down as fourteen. What is your name?"

He whipped out a note book, and under the nearest lamp began writing a description of Bob.

"Your name?" he snapped out again, when the boy hesitated. Torn between a desire to give a fictitious name and an inclination to escape by running away while the officer was off his guard, Bob hesitated another second. Then, realizing

the futility of trying to conceal his identity, he replied boldly:

“Robert Lane!”

“Lane! Lane! Is it a German name? Was one of your parents German?”

“No!” exclaimed Bob, sullenly. “There’s no German blood in me. My mother was a Belgian, and my father an American.”

“American!” The word came out viciously. “American!” he repeated, growing very red in the face. “They’re worse than the French or English. They are Yankee pigs. They think they can fight, but they’re bluffers—money-makers—little traders!”

“They can fight, you’ll find,” interrupted Bob. “They’ll give the German troops a run for their money.”

“*Ach!* Fight!” scornfully. “They’ll run the first time they hear our guns.”

“How about Château-Thierry!” Bob interrupted boldly. “Did n’t they fight and lick the Germans there?”

“Eh! What’s that! Château-Thierry!”

“And Belleau Woods!” continued Bob, defi-

antly, his anger up. "Did n't they drive your best troops out there?"

The surprise and anger of the officer threatened to bring on an attack of apoplexy. His veins swelled up and his face grew nearly purple with rage. But his prisoner was a boy, and he would treat him disdainfully.

"I know nothing about the places you speak of," he replied loftily, shrugging his shoulders. "There are no such places; and if the Yankee pigs are there, it must be far behind the lines, where German bullets can't reach them."

Bob laughed good-naturedly, for now that he had betrayed so much of the knowledge that had filtered in to him through his Vigilantes, he was boastful enough to want to go farther.

"Château-Thierry is right in the thickest part of the fighting," he replied, "and the Germans had to get out of it in a hurry when the Americans attacked them. Thousands of them were killed and wounded or captured."

"Americans, you mean!"

"No, Germans, and some of your best troops."

In his enthusiasm Bob had forgotten that he

was talking to a German officer, and his knowledge of such intimate progress on the West Front suddenly aroused the other's suspicion. He leaned forward and glared at Bob. Then, with a heavy hand on his collar, he jerked him forward.

"A spy!" he hissed. "A young American spy! *Ach!* The brave American can repeat this to the commandant, and then—"

He waved his hands over his head, imitated the action of a firing-squad, and ended with the one word, "*Pouff!*"

Holding Bob by the collar, he turned to Egmont and Guy: "I shall not want you to-night. The American spy is the one I was after. Go!"

Guy and Egmont remained stock-still, for it was not their nature to run when one of their companions was in trouble. Seeing their hesitation, the officer grumbled a word of command to the guard, who raised his bayonet and made as if to prod them with it. The boys stepped back a few paces, but did not run.

"Go on home, Egmont and Guy," Bob said. "I'm in no danger. It's all bluff and talk."

"We don't want to leave you, Bob," replied Egmont.

"You can't do any good by staying. You'll only get yourself into trouble. I don't mind spending a night in the guardhouse. In the morning they'll release me."

Guy and Egmont reluctantly drew away, and finally disappeared in the shadows of a side street. Bob was led off by his captors and placed under lock and key for the night.

Events had followed one another so fast that his mind was too excited for sleep. He kept thinking of Jean and Charlotte, and wondered if they had made good their escape from the city, and if so, where were they hiding? He was glad for Charlotte's sake that they had not delayed until morning. He shuddered at what might have happened if she had not gone.

During the sleepless hours of the night, he recalled Madame and Monsieur de Chokier. How splendidly they had met and faced their sorrow, and how calmly and defiantly they had answered the German officer's brutal threats!

He reviewed the day's work in the abandoned

sewer, and exulted at the thought that the wires connected with the underground mines had been cut. If the Huns were ever forced to evacuate Brussels, they would attempt to blow up the square with the mines planted under the houses, but what would be their surprise when they refused to go off? Bob smiled to himself. He would like to be present to see their consternation.

Toward morning he finally fell asleep, and did not awaken until some time past daybreak. He was finally aroused by a guard, and after a breakfast of the coarse prison fare, he was ordered to follow him. Curious and a little anxious as to his fate, he accompanied the guard through a long, dark corridor, and came out into a small room where an officer, with many decorations pinned to his breast, was awaiting him. The moment Bob appeared, the young Prussian who had arrested him, came in by another door.

"Is this the American spy you arrested, Lieutenant?" the superior officer asked, turning to the other.

"Yes, he is the Yankee pig. He boasted of his knowledge, and—"

"He 's nothing but a youth—a mere boy," murmured the elderly officer.

"He 's old enough to work, and therefore old enough to be a dangerous enemy."

"All right. We 'll see what he knows."

Bob knew he was in for a quiz such as he had never been subjected to before. He recalled what he had heard of the third degree that the police used to give to prisoners back home. Would they resort to physical force, or depend chiefly on browbeating and threats?

The examination began in a leisurely way, and without any show of force or threats. Indeed, the superior officer assumed the attitude of one interested in him, smiling in a benevolent manner occasionally; but he took Bob's whole pedigree, an aide writing down the questions and answers with scrupulous care. When this preliminary had been finished, the officer turned to him and said:

"Now tell me what you said to Lieutenant Bohn last night."

Bob related all he could recall, repeating the conversation word for word. The officer made

no comment until he was through. Then, twiddling his stubby thumbs over his chest, he added:

"Now tell me how you knew all this. But be careful that you don't tell me a lie. I want nothing but the truth."

"Why, sir," Bob replied, truthfully, and with an innocent expression in his blue eyes, "it is common talk. Everybody knows it in Brussels."

"Everybody!"

"Nearly everybody—even the boys and girls."

The man scowled and twisted one end of his mustache into his mouth and began chewing it. He was both annoyed and troubled. Bob, fearing to be pressed too closely, suddenly thought of a way to divert suspicion from himself.

"Why, even 'La Libre Belgique' says so," he added.

The effect of these words was instantaneous. The fatherly, benevolent expression on the officer's face disappeared, and a look of rage succeeded it. He became red, and then purple. He rose from his seat and smashed his hand down so heavily upon the table that his aide, busily en-

gaged in writing, jumped back in fright. Turning to the lieutenant, he thundered:

“That’s your spy—that paper! How many times have I ordered you to suppress it! Go and find it, and bring the owner of it to me! I have said so! Obey!”

His rage was fully justified, and in his heart Bob was laughing. “*La Libre Belgique*” was a Belgian newspaper that had been published secretly in Brussels ever since the invasion. A reward of five thousand, then ten, and finally fifteen, thousand dollars, had been offered to any one whose information would lead to the discovery of the editor and printer of it.

But the search had been in vain. Order after order had been issued to suppress it, but the sheet continued to appear more or less regularly, and was secretly distributed among the Belgians. The utmost effort of the German intelligence bureau had failed to unearth it.

In intimating that “*La Libre Belgique*” was the source of his information, Bob had effectually diverted suspicion from himself. A few minutes

later he was dismissed and released; but as he left the prison and made his way outside, he was aware of peering eyes following him. Were his footsteps shadowed by a spy for the purpose of locating what was more important to the German commandant—the discovery of the secret printing-place of the defiant newspaper? Bob smiled at the thought, and continued on his way to his cousin's home.

CHAPTER X

THE MYSTERY OF THE CHATEAU

EGMONT greeted Bob's return with effusive demonstrations of joy, for, all night long, not once had he closed his eyes in sleep.

"How did you escape, Bob?" he demanded.

"They let me go," was the laughing rejoinder, "just as I expected they would. That young prig of a lieutenant had nothing on me."

"But tell me what happened," asked Egmont, eagerly.

In a few words Bob related the incidents of the examination before the commandant, and then added: "That is n't the first time 'La Libre Belgique' has helped out people in trouble. I wonder who publishes it, and how they manage to do it. Every German officer and private is on the lookout for the editor."

"Whoever he is, he's a great patriot!" replied

Egmont, enthusiastically. "I 'd like to congratulate him."

"Perhaps it 's just as well we don't know him," mused Bob. "I have reasons to believe I 'm being shadowed, Egmont. They think I know the editor, and where the paper is published. That 's why they let me off so easily. It was a ruse to make a bigger capture."

"Then we 'd better keep away from our meeting-place for a few days. They might trace us to the abandoned sewer."

"Yes, we 'll keep out of it for the present. Pass the word around to the boys that we 're being watched. We might make a trip outside the city, just to throw them off the trail. Let 's see—can't we visit the ruined château near Laeken? I 've always wanted to see it. There 's no German guard there now. It will be a sort of vacation in the country."

"Yes, but the Germans are at Laeken at the king's summer palace. We don't want to go near that."

"I 'll keep away from them. I 've had enough of their company to last me for some time."

Laeken was a short distance from the suburbs of Brussels, and was noted chiefly as being the seat of King Albert's summer palace, perched on a hill overlooking the city. It was an imposing building of gray stone in the Renaissance style. The greenhouses surrounding it were erected by King Leopold, and before the war they were considered the largest and finest in Europe. One could walk for miles through glass covered walks.

The German high command had taken possession of the summer palace, and many of the greenhouses had been dismantled or completely destroyed; but it was still an imposing and wonderful place. Beyond the splendid park of Laeken stretched a series of beautiful châteaux. One of these dated back several centuries, and its ruins were visited by many travelers.

It had not been disturbed by the invaders, for there was nothing in its appearance to excite cupidity or to arouse their animosity. It represented a past age which had no connection with the present war. A report had been current that a concrete emplacement for big guns had been built under the ruins before the war by a German,

who had betrayed his adopted country; but there had been no verification of this story. As the Belgians, to save their beautiful capital from bombardment, had surrendered Brussels without a struggle, the invading army had not found it necessary to use their big guns, and the historic ruins had been left untouched. There was nothing in them that could prove of value to the conquerors.

Bob and Egmont having decided to make a day of it in the country, they invited Guy to accompany them, and set out early the following morning. Once more they were care-free, rollicking boys, with no more serious thought on their minds than that of having a good time. They carried fish-lines and hooks in their pockets, although fishing was "*streng verboden*"—strictly forbidden—in any of the streams or lakes by order of the German high command. But there was always the chance of slyly dropping a line in some obscure pool or hole and hauling out a good fish. The very fact that it was forbidden by the enemy of their country added zest and temptation to the sport.

The old ruins of the château were several miles beyond the king's summer palace, and outside of the park that inclosed it. Egmont knew a short cut across the fields and through the woods, which enabled them to reach it without encountering any sentries. Once among the trees they felt reasonably safe from prying eyes, and soon reached the château.

"I wonder if any spy tracked us," Bob remarked as he threw himself down on the leafy earth. "I did n't see any one, did you?"

"No, but we might watch here," replied Guy. "We can hide in the bushes, and if any one was following us he 'll have to show himself. He can't reach the woods without crossing that open field."

Exhilarated by the thought that they were outwitting the German intelligence officers, they concealed themselves in the bushes near the edge of the wood and waited. They had a clear view of the open field. Any one crossing it would have to come out in plain sight.

"I don't believe we were shadowed," remarked Guy after a considerable wait. "Why not go on?"

"No, we'll wait a little longer," replied Bob. "If any one was following us, he would give us time to get out of the woods. He might be shrewd enough to think we'd hide here and watch for him."

"He could n't conceal his uniform from us," Guy added.

Bob laughed good-naturedly.

"You don't think a spy would be so stupid as to walk around in a German uniform, do you?" he asked. "No, if he's following us he'll appear in civilian dress. He'll turn up as an ordinary Belgian peasant, and appear just as stupid."

They waited a full hour, although it was irksome to remain quiet that length of time, with the birds singing in the trees and all nature smiling and beckoning to them. Finally Bob rose and declared there was no further danger. Either the spy had not followed them, or had been thrown off their track.

"Come on, we won't wait any longer," he announced. "Let's fish in the brook that runs through this woods. Who knows but we may catch something?"

They began digging for bait, lifting up old stones and trunks of fallen trees, until they had unearthed a few grubs and worms for their hooks. Cutting down poles for their fishing-rods, and trimming off the small branches, they made their way to the turbulent little brook that flowed rollickingly through the heart of the woods.

Selecting a favorable place they cast their lines in the water, and began angling for anything tempted by the bait. But either the fish were not biting that morning, or the Germans had fished the streams until there was nothing left, for after an hour of patient waiting they gave it up.

They threw away their poles, rolled up their lines to tuck away in their pockets, and once more resumed their trip in the direction of the ruined château. The park that had once surrounded the ancient ruins backed up to the very edge of the woods, and they reached it without exposing themselves to open view.

The château was merely a pile of ancient ruins, with vines creeping over and hiding them partly from view. They had been deserted so long that the weeds and overgrowth were everywhere. The

picturesque piles of masonry, rising out of their bed of rampant green, held the attention of the boys for some time. They stood surveying them before attempting to climb over them.

"No one's around," Egmont whispered. "Let's go on."

Bob nodded, and they began their climb. The walls in places were so rotten and weak that they had to use extreme care. Once inside the ruins they found the same conditions prevailing, nothing but neglect, disorder, and decay. The vines and weeds had made a brave attempt to hide what man had created, but underneath their covering the relics of a past age came to view.

After making a thorough investigation of the once turreted walls and the moat surrounding them, now filled in with débris, they made their way into what had been the main hall of the château. Here an old pair of stone steps, in a better state of preservation than the walls, led downward, and the boys, bent on exploration, descended them.

At the bottom they came to a cellarlike room,

with sagging walls and half-demolished ceiling. They made their way gingerly across this to an arched passageway that seemed to lead still further into the heart of the château.

"Where does this go?" asked Bob, peering into the dimness.

"There was an old dungeon down there," replied Egmont, "where they used to keep prisoners. Nearly all of the old châteaux had dungeons underneath them. Later they were turned into wine-cellars."

"Let's see it," said Bob. "I was never in one before."

"Better not," his cousin warned. "The walls may fall in and bury you alive."

"Oh, if they've stood up all these years, I guess they won't cave in to-day," Bob added, entering the archway.

Egmont and Guy followed, for Bob's exploring curiosity was shared by them, and they were not going to stay behind on account of some fancied danger.

The archway opened into a long tunnel, the

walls of which were damp and musty. They had stumbled along this for some distance until they came to another short flight of stairs.

"I would n't go any further," Egmont cautioned again.

But Bob was already descending the stone steps, and at the bottom he hailed them.

"Here 's another tunnel. Where does that go?"

"I don't know, but we 'd better go back."

"No, I 'm going on."

Bob stopped suddenly and cocked his head to one side.

"Listen!" he whispered. "I thought I heard a noise."

"No, it was Guy's foot kicking a stone," replied his cousin.

Bob nodded, but remained listening. Then he found it was not so much a noise that had attracted his attention, as a vibration of the floor on which they stood. It was so distant and muffled that it was scarcely perceptible, but when they remained perfectly still they could hear—or feel—it distinctly.

It was a series of jarring vibrations like the

distant pounding of horses' hoofs on the earth. "It comes from above us," Guy whispered, after a long pause.

"Yes, horsemen," replied Bob. "Do you suppose they have followed us, after all?"

"Yes," murmured Egmont, "and perhaps thrown a cordon of Uhlans around the chateau."

"Well, they 're taking a lot of trouble for nothing," said Bob. "If they think we 're concealing somebody in the ruins we 'll have the laugh on them. Let 's keep them guessing."

"They 'll come down here soon to look for us, I suppose."

"Then they 're going to have a hard time finding us. Come on, we 'll hide in this tunnel. I wonder where it leads."

"To the dungeon," replied Egmont. "I 'm sure of it."

Bob led the way, proceeding cautiously along in the darkness to avoid tripping. The tunnel was dripping with moisture, and when they touched the walls with bare hands it made them shudder. Here and there small animals and reptiles

crawled away, startling them at times with their squeaks or hisses.

"I don't like this," remarked Guy, finally. "I 'd rather be up where it 's lighter."

"Listen!" Bob whispered. "The sounds are increasing. Feel that wall. It vibrates as if—"

"Are you sure this tunnel does n't have an outlet into the open air?" interrupted Guy. "We 're getting nearer the sounds."

"I never knew that it did," replied Egmont, in perplexity. "But the walls may have crumbled in ahead and made a breach in the tunnel."

Bob had been standing very still, both hands on the moist wall. Suddenly he exclaimed: "That is n't from above! It 's down here!"

His two companions stared at him in amazement. "Yes, I 'm sure it 's down here," Bob added.

"How could Uhlans be down here?" asked Guy, incredulously.

"Perhaps they 're using the dungeon for a stable," replied Bob, smiling. The others scoffed at such a suggestion, and Bob was finally forced to add: "Oh, I did n't mean that seriously."

But I never said that the noise was made by the hoofs of horses. I don't think it is. Listen again! It is n't a noise at all. It's just a vibration."

"Sounds enough like the muffled pounding of hoofs to me," Egmont answered.

"They would n't keep it up so steadily, would they? It has n't stopped once since we first heard it. It's as regular as—as machinery."

They applied their ears to the walls and listened in silence for some time. The uncanny pounding continued, but strangely enough, seemed to come no nearer. Coupled with the darkness and the strangeness of their position, it was nerve-racking.

"Let's go back," murmured Egmont.

"No," was Bob's stubborn answer, "I'm going to find out what makes that noise. Come on."

Egmont grumbled, but followed, and Guy, with even more reluctance, brought up the rear. Creeping stealthily along, using the right wall as a guide, Bob led the way in the darkness. To their great surprise, the muffled noises and vibrations increased as they proceeded, until finally

Guy and Egmont were as eager as their leader to explore the mystery. There was something strange and uncanny about it that piqued their curiosity, even while it frightened them.

Bob stumbled along blindly, for the floor in many places was littered with sharp stones and fallen mortar. The tunnel curved to the right, and instead of rounding it, he struck against one side.

"Look out!" he whispered. "It turns here."

The moment they turned the curve, the muffled vibrations became so clear and distinct that the boys stopped in tense surprise. Whatever it was, they were close upon the solution of the mystery. Their hearts beat rapidly, while they listened.

"It's just ahead!" Bob whispered.

He started forward so eagerly that he tripped upon something in his pathway. The next moment he went plunging forward on hands and knees, landing with considerable force on the hard floor. With a grunt of pain and dismay, he lay there a moment, a little stunned by the fall.

"Are you hurt, Bob?" Egmont asked softly.

"No, not much. But listen! Where's the noise? Do you hear it?"

All three remained absolutely quiet and motionless, their ears vainly trying to catch the sound that had led them onward like a will-o'-wisp. But it was deathly quiet in the tunnel, and the vibration had absolutely ceased. The silence was so startling that they dared scarcely breathe for fear of breaking it.

CHAPTER XI

PRISONERS

THE puzzling quiet that followed Bob's mishap was further accentuated by a queer sensation that somebody else was with them in the narrow chamber, and that they were being watched by eyes that could see them through the darkness. Or, if eyes could not penetrate the intense gloom, at least ears could hear.

The pounding noises that had drawn them onward, and had now mysteriously ceased, were undoubtedly of human origin. Not one of the boys attributed anything supernatural to them, though the idea that they were caused by the pounding of hoofs on the earth above had long since been dismissed. They felt sure the sounds had come from somewhere in the underground passageway through which they had been crawling.

After the first shock—for intense silence can

give as distinct a shock to the mind as a great explosion—the three little adventurers remained as quiet as so many frightened rabbits cowering before a hound that had run them into their burrow. They were almost afraid to breathe, and in their effort to inhale and exhale noiselessly they made queer little sounds that startled them.

The silence continued for so long that Bob began to doubt his senses. Had not the queer vibrations been part of his imagination? The underground passageway was so quiet and normal that it was difficult for him to conceive of it any other way. He finally ventured a whisper.

“I wonder what it was!”

Egmont shook his head.

“I don’t know, but we ’d better crawl back. I don’t like it in here.”

“Is it safe to strike a match?”

“No, no! If anybody’s watching us, that would give us away.”

“I hate to go back without explaining the mystery. Let’s wait and see if the noises come again.”

They waited a tense ten minutes, but nothing happened—not the slightest sound indicated the presence of any one in the tunnel. Finally, Bob could bear it no longer.

“I ’m going to strike a match,” he announced. “There ’s nothing to fear. Suppose it ’s a German spy; he can’t do any more than capture us, and we’ve done nothing. Our presence here is n’t a crime.”

“No, but—” began his cousin, hesitatingly, and then stopped for lack of any good reason for objecting.

Bob accepted this as approval of his intention, and taking a match from his pocket, he struck it on the cover of the box. There was a brilliant flare which illumined the tunnel ahead; but it disclosed nothing but the moisture-dripping walls. When the wood of the match caught fire the light was dimmer, but steadier. Bob held it over his head to look around.

“There ’s nothing here,” he murmured. “I ’ll go a little farther, and then strike another match.”

Neither Egmont nor Guy objected to this, and when Bob moved forward they followed close behind him. They had no desire to get separated in the tunnel, and they snuggled close together. Ten feet ahead Bob stopped and struck another match. This time it lighted up the passageway only a short distance, for directly ahead it took a sharp turn again, and they could not see around this corner.

"It turns to the left," he whispered. "When we get to the corner I'll strike another match."

They followed the walls until they came to the curve, and once more Bob fumbled in his box for a match. He was on the point of striking it when something happened that completely upset all their calculations.

There came a sudden flash of light ahead that cut through the darkness like a searchlight, temporarily blinding and paralyzing them. Several dark forms shot forward, and before any of the boys could raise a hand to defend himself, he was borne to the earth and securely pinioned by powerful arms.

"Have you got all of them?" came a growling voice in front. "Be quite sure! Search the tunnel."

A series of lights flashed all around them, as dark figures leaped over the prostrate prisoners and began a hurried search of the passageway back of them. The lights and the figures gave a strange, uncanny aspect to the scene. Despite their courage, the boys trembled. They had no idea who the men were or their purpose there.

Their captors had trussed them up quickly, and put gags in their mouths so they could not speak. The lights disappeared around the curve in the tunnel, and for some time the darkness was as intense as before.

Five minutes later the men with the electric torches returned. "No one else," the first man reported.

"Then bring them in," replied the one who had spoken first.

In perfect silence their captors picked up the boys and carried them through the tunnel and into an underground chamber, which, as Egmont immediately recognized, and Bob suspected, had

been the dungeon of the old château and had been used later as a wine cellar. It was a broad, moderately high chamber, hewn out of the solid rock, the only entrance to it being that through which the boys had been carried. The iron door that had once guarded the passageway had long since rusted off its hinges, but a new one, made of timber and braced with rough-hewn logs, had replaced it.

When this door was closed, and a thick beam placed in front of it, a huge kerosene lamp, suspended from the middle of the roof, was lighted and several smaller ones along the walls. It was not a brilliant illumination, but enough for the prisoners to inspect their surroundings.

At first they were more interested in the men about them. If they were German spies, their dress did not indicate it. They were in civilian clothes—rough, stained jackets, trousers and aprons; they had bearded faces and small, burning eyes, which constantly shifted from one of the prisoners to the other.

The chamber was furnished in the strangest way. In fact, it might be said that it was n't

furnished at all, for boxes were the only seats visible, and huddles of straw and blankets in the corners were the only signs of beds. There was a long table down the center, but it was littered with books and papers rather than with dishes and things to eat. A queer-looking machine stood in one corner, and rows of flat, shallow boxes were arranged near it. Not even Bob could make a guess as to their meaning.

The man who seemed to be the leader finally took a torch from one of his men and flashed it in the faces of the boys, studying their features under conditions more favorable to him than to his prisoners. He continued this for some time, frowning all the while.

"Boys," he mumbled finally, in disgust. "They're not spies."

"Don't be too sure of that," murmured another bearded companion. "Spies are spies, whether boys or men."

The two made a more critical study of the faces of their helpless prisoners, while a third went through their pockets. When the result of

this search revealed nothing but the usual contents of the average boy's pocket—knives, fish-line, hooks, a few marbles, and knick-knacks of apparently no earthly value, the man showed his disgust.

"Nothing but trash," he growled, throwing them on the ground in a heap.

The others glanced at them, and then back at their prisoners. "Remove the gags from their mouths," commanded the leader, "and we'll give them a chance to explain."

The relief that came with the removal of the uncomfortable gags brought a sigh from each boy.

"Thanks!" said Bob, grinning at his captors. "I never knew a gag could feel so uncomfortable."

The leader again stared searchingly at them. Now that his captives were boys, and not full-grown men, a good deal of the fierceness left his face, and his eyes twinkled.

"Who are you?" he asked, nodding at Bob.

"Robert Lane," was the prompt reply. "And

that 's my cousin Egmont d'Anethan," he added, speaking for the others. "And the other 's Guy d'Assches."

"Count d'Anethan's grandson?" queried the leader, indicating Egmont.

"Yes. If you 've lived in Belgium, you ought to know him—everybody does; and I 'm his American cousin."

The man 's face changed slowly. The old fear and suspicion was succeeded by a look of friendliness.

"Yes," he nodded; "I know Count d'Anethan quite well, and I 've heard of his two grandchildren."

He began stroking his shaggy beard in meditation. Then he asked, with a little return of his former suspicion, "What were you doing down here? What were you after in the tunnel?"

"Nothing, except to explore it," replied Bob, promptly. "Egmont said it led to the old dungeon of the ruined château, and I wanted to see it."

"Well, you see it now," was the smiling reply.

"This it?" queried Bob. "Well,"—grinning,

"it looks like a pretty good prison. I'd hate to be shut up here for a year or two. Did they keep many prisoners here?"

"I don't know. That was before our time. I imagine they did, who can tell?"

The leader withdrew to confer with his men, and while they talked together at the other side of the chamber the boys had a chance to whisper to each other without being overheard.

"Who are they, do you think?" Bob asked. "And what are they doing down here?"

"I don't know," replied Egmont, "but they're not Germans. They're Belgians. Anybody would know that."

"And the face of the leader is familiar to me," remarked Guy. "I've seen him somewhere in Brussels, but I can't remember where."

"Then if we can prove we're friends of Belguim, and not traitors, they ought to let us go," added Bob.

"I don't know," mumbled his cousin. "We've stumbled upon some secret of theirs, and they may be afraid to give us our liberty. How do they know we won't tell what we've seen?"

"Well, we'll soon know. They've reached a decision, and their leader's come to tell us."

The dark-bearded man was approaching. He stopped before the boys, and stood for a moment in silence. "It's unfortunate that you stumbled in here," he began finally. "It puts us in a very difficult position. We don't want to hurt you or cause you discomfort, but for the sake of Belgium we have to do many things that we would not do at any other time. We have to consider the greater question of our country's welfare. Now if we should release you, you would talk of what you had seen here, and—"

"Not if it's for the cause of Belgium!" interrupted Bob. "We can keep a secret as well as any one."

The man shook his head sagely. "It would be dangerous to let you go. A German spy might overhear you talking of it, and then—" he waved his hand expressively over his head—"that would be the end of all our work."

"What are you going to do with us then?" interrupted Guy. "Keep us prisoners until the war ends or—or—kill us?"

"No," said the man, smiling, "we 're not going to kill you, and we 'd hate to imprison you for the duration of the war. The only thing I can think of is to hold you until we can move to some other place. That would take quite a while, and would be a big nuisance. Good hiding-places are scarce now that the Huns have flooded the country with spies."

"Yes, we know that," replied Bob, "but we 've got one they have n't found yet."

"I suppose so," was the smiling comment. "Boys know good hiding-places if anybody does. But we have to have a roomy place for our work."

Bob glanced around the rock-hewn chamber and recalled the muffled pounding and vibration that had drawn them on in their explorations. His eyes rested on the machine at one side of the chamber, and the shallow boxes standing near it. There was something familiar in both, and for a few moments his mind was busy trying to piece together disjointed facts. Suddenly his face cleared. He looked up triumphantly.

"I know now what you 're doing down here!"

he exclaimed, not realizing the effect the words would have on his captors.

"What!" demanded the leader, in a voice that suddenly lost all its friendliness.

"That 's a printing-press, is n't it?" Bob asked. "And those shallow boxes are type-cases. I was in a printing-office once, and—"

"Well, what of that?" asked the man, trying to appear indifferent.

"Nothing, except—except—"

"What?" snarled the other.

Bob hesitated to speak what was on his mind, but his suspicion had become almost a certainty, and it was impossible to hold it back.

"Don't you print 'La Libre Belgique' down here?" he asked. "Yes," he added triumphantly, "and you must be the editor of it. The Huns have set a big price on your head. They 're looking everywhere for you. When I told the commandant I'd read in your paper about the American soldiers coming in big numbers, he nearly had a fit. He said to the lieutenant that your paper was the spy, and not I. That 's how I got off."

"What are you talking about?" cut in the man, frowning.

Bob, realizing that his disjointed remarks were not very enlightening, quickly related the series of events that had led up to his arrest, confident that the editor of the only paper published in Brussels of Belgian origin would not betray him. He explained in some detail how Jean and Charlotte had disguised themselves and escaped. When he came to his acquittal, he added:

"So you see, your paper really saved me. If I had n't thought of it they might have held me as an American spy. I guess I'll have to thank you for it."

Without confirming or denying any connection with the paper that had done so much to keep up the spirits of the Belgians during the long German occupation, the man asked:

"Where did you get all your information about the Americans coming over in such numbers? Was it just guesswork, or have you seen some of the English papers?"

"No, it was n't guesswork," replied Bob.

slowly. "It came to me straight enough, and I know it's true."

"Who told you?"

Bob hesitated a second, and then replied, smiling:

"The Vigilantes!"

"Vigilantes! Who are they? I never heard of them." Then, scowling, the man added: "Is this some boyish fooling? If so, this is no place for it. Whether you know it or not, you've got yourself into a serious predicament. We can't let you go now. The fate of too many good men depends upon it. We must hold you prisoners until we can move to another hiding-place."

CHAPTER XII

THE MYSTERY EXPLAINED

BOB realized that he had not helped matters by his reference to the organization he had formed, and, in order to convince his captors of the seriousness of his purpose, it was necessary to take them fully into his confidence. This was something that none of the Vigilantes had done before, and, indeed, it was a part of their creed to keep the secret from their elders. But the emergency was great, and if the speaker was the unknown editor of "La Libre Belgique," he could be trusted.

The boy looked up at the scowling face, and asked, "Are you the editor of 'La Libre Belgique'?"

The man did not reply. His face turned red, and an angry gleam entered his eyes. "Keep them prisoners, Jacques," he said, turning to one

of his companions. "They don't intend any wrong, I suppose, but boys can't be trusted."

Bob's face flushed, and with some difficulty he raised himself to a sitting position. "Wait until you've heard our story before you say that," he interrupted quickly. "We're working for the good of Belgium as well as you. The Boy Vigilantes are pledged to secrecy, but I know I can trust you. I'll tell you who they are."

The man was impressed by the seriousness of the speaker, and stopped to listen.

"Go on!" he said gruffly, "my time's precious!"

Bob cleared his throat, and began to relate briefly the story of how the Vigilantes had been organized. Their early work, which seemed unimportant now in the light of subsequent events, he dwelt briefly upon. It consisted for the most part in spreading encouraging news among the enslaved population, helping the aged and infirm, cheering those who were depressed, delivering secretly copies of French and English papers that had been smuggled in, and keeping

the people in touch with events outside of Brussels.

Then he explained how the organization had spread from Brussels to Ghent, and from there to Antwerp, and from Malines to Bruges—how it gradually included the boys of city and country from one end of Belgium to the other. He told of how Henri Rogiers of Ghent had brought news to him of conditions in that city, and of how Albert de Decker of Antwerp and Alva Chassé of Malines had spread the organization to include the best boys in their respective towns.

When he came to the account of the discovery of the mines the Germans had placed under the city of Brussels to blow up the most important buildings in the event of their enforced evacuation, and of how the Vigilantes had cut the wires and spliced them with short lengths of non-conducting material, the men crowded around him and listened intently, craning their heads forward in eager interest.

He related again their meeting with Jean de Chokier in the abandoned sewer, and their help in smuggling him and his sister out of the house

just in time to avoid capture. His subsequent capture by the Germans, and the reason for their visit to the old château followed briefly. When he reached the end of his story, he looked up, and added:

“Now if you don’t believe we can keep a secret for the sake of our country, nothing I can say will convince you. Anyway, we know you publish ‘La Libre Belgique’ down here, and the secret is safe with us. No Hun could torture it from us.”

He stopped and looked a little belligerently at the circle of faces. They were all old men, past middle life, but the fire of youth and patriotism burned in their eyes. They were doing a work for their country that would condemn them to long imprisonment, if not to death, should their conquerors learn of their secret.

The leader was the first to speak. He leaned forward suddenly and caught Bob by the hand.

“Incredible! Incredible!” he exclaimed. “Yet it must be true!”

Under the stress of his emotion, he began pacing back and forth, his hands working nervously.

“Down-trodden, ruined, tortured by fire and sword, Belgium must live and be greater than ever again,” he murmured. “First, its brave soldiers are put to the test and prove worthy. Then its mothers and wives are spitted on the sword, outraged, beaten, enslaved, but their spirit is never broken. The aged and infirm are herded like cattle and half starved, and the yoke they bear galls, but does not break. And now its children, its brave boys and girls, the hope of our beloved country, rally to the standard and show they’re worthy of their fathers and mothers. With such young patriots, O Belgium! nothing else matters! Thy name should be emblazoned on the field of glory! Thermopylæ and Marathon! I have lived to see them repeated again here in peace-loving Belgium! *Vive la Belgique!*”

With the fire of intense patriotism burning in his eyes, he turned to his men, and added: “*Vive les Vigilantes!*”

The men responded with enthusiasm, the echo of their voices rolling through the cavernous depths of the chamber and tunnels like the

rumbling of the surf in a cave. Bob was deeply moved by the spontaneous tribute to the organization the boys had formed, but a little worried by the thought that some prowling German might overhear them.

"Are n't you afraid some spy will find you here?" Bob asked.

"No, we're safe enough," replied the leader.

"But we heard the pounding of your press—or at least I suppose it was that which made the noise."

"Yes, we were busy running off a special edition," was the smiling reply, "and to get more air we left the door open. That's why you heard it. But it's closed now, and no noise goes through the padded door. We're safe in here."

The boys glanced in the direction of the heavy wooden door and saw that its thick planks were padded by an old mattress which deadened all sound and much of the vibration caused by the pounding of the press. Suddenly the leader of the gang of printers remembered something that

had escaped his mind. Raising his hand, he said:

“Release them! They’re Belgium’s friends and ours!”

The ropes that bound the boys were cut so quickly that for a moment their numb hands and legs could not readjust themselves to the new freedom. The men helped them to their feet and began rubbing their stiff limbs. Food and drink were brought to them, and while the young Vigilantes ate and drank they were plied with all sorts of questions.

Bob was so faint and hungry that he readily yielded the floor to Guy and Egmont, who soon found it so difficult to answer all the questions fired at them that they were in a fair way of not getting their portion of the refreshments. Bob grinned, and continued eating in silence. Finally satisfied, he got up and walked around the chamber to exercise his legs.

“Do you mind if I look at the press?” he asked, approaching it.

“No, you have the freedom of the place,” re-

plied the leader. "It is not a big press, nor have we much assortment of type. Some of it wore out, and we had to replace it with new that we made ourselves. It's the most independent paper published in the world."

"I should think so," Bob replied, smiling at the other's grinning face. "The Germans think you're too independent."

"They'd give a good deal to run us to earth, would n't they? But not until Belgium is freed from the tyrant can they stop us. But I must apologize for our foreign service. Our wires are not working well, and our special correspondents must be taking a vacation. Our wire to Berlin is kept hot with German expletives. Still we manage."

Bob smiled at the other's humor, for "La Libre Belgique" was perhaps the only paper in the world that had no special wires or any connection with international news agencies. It depended for its information upon its few friends, who managed to penetrate "the wall of iron and blood" to get little shreds of news that would put heart in their people through methods peculiarly

their own. But what the paper lacked in news, it made up for in cheerful and witty sarcasms concerning their conquerors, always nourishing good humor and sustaining the optimism of the people of Belgium.

A fresh copy of it was just off the press. Bob picked it up and glanced at it. Beneath the name in big lines was the motto:

“Bulletin de Propagande Patriotique-Régulièrement Irrégulier Ne se soumettant
à aucune censure.”

Literally translating this, Bob read as follows:

“Bulletin of Patriotic Propaganda—Regularly Irregular. We do not submit to
any censorship.”

Bob smiled, and once more looked up at its editor and publisher.

“All it lacks is your name,” he remarked.

“No, it’s better without it,” replied the man, shrugging his shoulders. “Persons do not count in such times. We give our time and labor to our country for the good of all.”

Bob nodded, for the speaker's modesty rather than fear had kept him from proclaiming his name to all the world. With his record of bold defiance of the German authorities, it was not likely that he would be afraid to publish his name at the head of his paper.

"I do not know your name," the boy hesitated; "perhaps—"

"No," was the emphatic reply, "I cannot tell you. It might get you into trouble, for I see you're not the kind to betray a friend even under compulsion. Not knowing the editor of 'La Libre Belgique,' you could not tell another."

He smiled so whimsically, his eyes bright and shining beneath their shaggy brows, that Bob felt strangely drawn toward him. In the stalwart patriot he recognized not only an editor that had defied the German censorship and laughed at the keenest members of the German intelligence bureau in their effort to catch him, but a kindly human being who had preserved his sanity and sense of humor throughout the trying times of the war. Bob could well imagine him as an affectionate and kindly father and hus-

band, who would like nothing better than the quiet, peaceful life of the family circle. His high, broad brow indicated also the scholar and thinker, a man who would be preëminent in any line he pursued.

“Maybe you ’re right,” the boy said, after a pause. “It ’s dangerous to know too much. We ’re all uncertain what may happen to us tomorrow. Egmont and I stand in daily fear of being seized and deported to Germany. Although under fourteen, we look old enough to be fifteen, and Germany ’s combing the country for all boys and girls old enough to work for her.”

The editor’s face suddenly clouded and grew serious.

“Yes,” he replied slowly, “your danger is very real. I have received word from one of my trusted reporters that the age limit is to be lowered for the next batch of youngsters. Germany ’s determined to drain the country of all human material that she can use. Having robbed us of all our wealth, stolen our machinery and valuable household articles, she is now look-

ing to strip us of our young. She will stop at nothing. It is enough to rouse the dead from their graves! It is the most terrible crime of the ages! God in his own wisdom must punish her in time!"

The man spoke slowly and vehemently, but with such powerful, concentrated force that the words seemed to burn in the brain. There was none of the excitement of the orator or demagogue in his voice. It was hard, bitter implacable.

"What do you think my cousin and I ought to do then?" Bob asked, after a pause. "I can't go to Germany! I won't go—not if I—"

"Words and threats are futile, my boy," was the interruption. "We must face facts. Every boy of your age is doomed to go—unless you leave Belgium before it is too late."

"That was my idea," Bob interrupted quickly. "I told Egmont we ought to get out of the country. We have advised all the older members of the Vigilantes to leave for Holland, France, or any place of safety. Many of them, I hope, are on their way across the border."

"But you remain?"

"Yes, but not for long. We'll go soon."

"Don't make it too late, then."

Bob was troubled by the speaker's words, for in them he read the extreme gravity of the situation.

"I shall go at once!" he announced finally. "Egmont must go too."

"Where will you go—to Holland? The border is closely guarded."

"No, I shall go west—to Ghent—to Bruges—and from there to France or Ypres. I want to join the Belgian forces. The Americans are there, I hear, as well as in France."

"How do you expect to get through the German lines?" was the inquisitive comment.

"I don't know, but I'll find a way. Yes, we'll get through. I have no fear of that."

"Overconfidence has ruined many a good intention."

"It beat the Huns at their wicked game," Bob laughed.

"Yes, but they're not the only ones whose plans have been spoilt by overconfidence," was the solemn retort.

Bob became instantly serious again.

"I did n't mean to appear overconfident," he replied. "I realize the dangers and difficulties. They will be great, and we'll have to use all our wits to escape them. But I believe we can do it if we're careful and patient. I'm ready to undertake it. So is Egmont."

"I'm glad to hear you speak so," replied the editor, drawing a sigh of relief. "Confidence, backed up with caution and wisdom, will carry one far. One must have all three to succeed in anything. I know you will get through."

He stopped and was quiet for a moment. Once or twice he glanced quizzically at Bob, and then dropped his eyes again. Finally he smiled and said: "If you have decided upon going, I shall use you as an agent for helping Belgium. It will not increase your danger and, if you get through, you will do my beloved country a great good. Do you care to undertake it?"

"Yes, indeed," replied Bob, eagerly. "Anything that will help the cause. I'm ready. What is it?"

"You're sure you want to take the risk?"

"I 'm going to start on my journey before another day," was the calm reply.

The man smiled and nodded his head.

"Then follow me," he said. "I have something to show you. It will surprise and interest you. This way."

CHAPTER XIII

MILITARY INFORMATION

THERE were several alcoves opening into the underground room, small spaces hewn out of the solid rock, and now partitioned off by blankets and stringy curtains. Some of these were used for storage purposes, others for sleeping quarters, with cots and mattresses littered around in great disorder.

When the unknown, but famous, editor of Belgium's uncensored newspaper led the way to one of these alcoves, Bob followed, his curiosity greatly aroused by the other's words. What new surprise and mystery awaited him? There seemed to be no end to the adventure into which they had unwittingly plunged.

A dim light was burning in the particular alcove before which the man stopped; and when he drew the curtain aside, the interior was clearly

revealed. The place was better furnished than the other parts of the gloomy dungeon, but not well enough to suggest luxury. There were a table and a couple of chairs, and a cot in one corner.

Lying on this, with nothing but his face exposed to view, was a young man, whose pale, emaciated features told of great mental or physical suffering. When the curtain was raised, the eyes of the invalid opened, burning with unexpected brilliancy.

"Has the noise disturbed you, Gustave?" the editor asked, in a kindly voice.

"No, Monsieur, I have slept, and feel better," murmured the invalid.

"That is well. Then I have good news to cheer you. I bring a friend."

"Ah, Monsieur, all your friends are my friends," replied Gustave, extending a hand, but when he saw that Bob was only a boy, he smiled quizzically.

"The future of our beloved country depends upon our young, Gustave. So do not undervalue the boys who some day must take our

places in the ranks. They have already shown themselves valiant defenders."

"I had a boy—not so old as he," the invalid murmured. "I hope he has escaped. But I do not know. I have been away so long—four years in German prisons and internment camps—four years of torture and suffering."

"Our friend here, Lieutenant Gustave Transquet, was among the valiant heroes who defended Liège," the editor explained, turning to Bob. "He was wounded and captured, and carried to Germany. The rest speaks for itself. For nearly four years he suffered internment in camps vile enough to kill a dog. Starved, frozen, and insulted, he never lost his faith, and he has returned to his compatriots at the risk of his life."

Bob felt a thrill of excitement as he looked into the face of the lieutenant with admiration and sympathy.

"I'm glad you've come back alive," he said simply. "But how'd you get here?"

"By cutting my way out of a wire pen, over-

powering two guards, hiding by day and traveling by night," was the succinct, smiling report.

The boy's eyes burned with enthusiasm, for in the brief statement was epitomized a whole series of adventures, some of which he might have to face under similar circumstances in the near future.

"Were you wounded?"

"Three times—and half starved. But I got home, and found my way into the hands of my dear friends."

There was no question about his injuries, for his emaciated face and gaunt limbs spoke volumes. Bob's sympathy was stirred. "You'll get better here," he added. "I wish I could do something for you."

"You can, my boy," interrupted the editor. "That's why I've brought you here. Gustave is suffering from something worse than physical pain."

Bob turned inquiringly upon the speaker, a little puzzled by his words. The man smiled and continued:

"It's super-patriotism."

More puzzled than ever, the boy continued staring at him.

"We all have it more or less," added the editor, "but Gustave has an exaggerated attack of it."

"Monsieur, this is not fair," interrupted the patient. "You, who have given up all for your country, and risk your life daily, should not speak so of another who is simply willing to die for the glory of Belgium."

"I'm willing to live for it, Gustave, and that's what I want to do. Sometimes it takes more courage to live for a great cause than to die for it. That's why I call your disease super-patriotism."

The lieutenant shrugged his shoulders and dropped back to an easier position on his couch, as if to say that he was through with argument.

"I'm afraid I've bewildered you, my boy," the editor added. "Gustave and I often argue on the points of one's duty to his land. We don't always agree. He feels that it is his duty to go on, dragging his crippled legs the rest of the way across Belgium, offering his life as a

sacrifice to the needless. I tell him he has done his duty, and he should stay here and rest."

"But the military information, Monsieur!" broke in the lieutenant in feverish excitement. "It will not keep."

"Wait, Gustave, I'm coming to that." Then addressing Bob again, he added: "In his four years in Germany, Gustave learned many things of great importance, information vital to the success of the Allies. In his flight across the border he picked up much more, details and facts of military preparation and design. If our beloved king knew of them, and could pass them on to the Allies, it might change the whole course of the war. Gustave was on his way to the front with this information when he broke down and fell into our hands. He was eager to go on, but we detained him. It will be weeks, if not months, before he will be a well man again."

A glimmer of enlightenment began to filter through Bob's brain. Gustave's patriotism had become concentrated into an intense longing to finish his work if he gave his life at the expiration of it.

"This valuable information must be got through," continued the editor. "We've told Gustave we would see to it, but so far we have had no plan, and every day he works himself into a fever thinking of it."

Bob's face suddenly broke into a smile. "And you want me to carry the information to the Allies?" he asked.

"Yes, either directly, in person, or through your young Vigilantes."

"Monsieur!" shrieked Gustave, rising again. "Monsieur, you would trust my great secret to—to a boy? Incredible! No, no, I shall never permit it! I shall rise from a sick bed and go on! Nothing shall detain me! I, Lieutenant Gustave Transquet, swear it!"

He threw the blanket from his gaunt body and made the attempt to carry his threat into execution; but a sudden giddiness overcame him, and he dropped back with a groan.

"Gustave," soothed the editor, "don't give way to your emotion. Listen to what I have to say. The boys of Belgium have proved themselves

worthy of their fathers. They have organized their forces, and are taking up the work that has been left undone. Our young friend here is half Belgian and half American."

"American!" exclaimed Gustave.

Bob nodded.

"Ah, the Americans saved Belgium from starving," the lieutenant said, grasping the boy's hand again. "May they now save her from a worse fate. Is it true they're coming over by the millions? In Germany they laugh at it, and say the Americans are money-grabbers and cowards; that the U-boats are sinking the American ships so fast they can't get across. Monsieur, here, says it is not true. I don't know! I only know what they told me in Germany."

"No, it is not true," replied Bob, eagerly. "The American soldiers are coming and will come until Germany is beaten."

"Ah, that is joyful news! Now I can die in peace!"

"No, Gustave, live in peace," interrupted the editor, smiling. "It's our duty to live for our

country. Haven't I told you that many times? Live to see Belgium redeemed and its tyrants punished!"

"Monsieur is right," replied Gustave. "It is to live to see the glorious day when our beloved king at the head of his army shall return to Brussels. Ah, that day will be worth living for. I shall not die! The *Boches* can't kill me!"

"No, but your wounds may," remarked his friend gently. "Now quiet yourself and listen to me. Our young American here has something to tell you." Then turning to Bob, he said, "tell him of the Boy Vigilantes, all that you told me."

Bob flushed a little, for it seemed like boasting of his own deeds, but the sick lieutenant watched him with eager eyes and nodded for him to begin.

The repetition of his story produced passing emotions of joy, relief, and excitement on the lieutenant's face, ending finally in a serious expression of delight and admiration.

"*Vive la Belgique!*" he exclaimed, waving a

hand; and then added, with equal enthusiasm, "*Vive les Vigilantes!*"

Bob smiled at this tribute, and once more Belgium's patriotic editor interposed.

"Now, Gustave," he said, "you understand why I proposed trusting your military information to the young Vigilantes. They will get it across if any one can. Our young friend and his cousin are planning to make the trip at once, to escape deportation to Germany. If they succeed, they will give the information to our King. If they fail, it will go by some other boy. They will spread it by word of mouth until it has passed across the border. No written documents—nothing that the enemy can seize upon. If they are captured, they cannot be arrested as spies, simply as fugitive boys trying to evade the tyrant's laws. Is it not well, Gustave, to use them as our messengers?"

The lieutenant was silent a moment, his eyes watching Bob's face closely. Then a slow smile of satisfaction spread over his own face. He extended a hand.

"The Vigilantes can be trusted. They will

finish the work that Gustave Transquet began."

"I will call our friends in to listen to his story," whispered the editor. "It is very interesting, and it should be heard so often that you cannot forget it. Gustave carries no papers. The information is here," he added, pointing to his forehead.

Bob waited until the man returned, accompanied by Egmont and Guy. In a few words they were informed of what had taken place in the alcove. Gustave welcomed them with open arms, and greeted them as Vigilantes.

"I told them, Egmont," Bob explained further to his cousin, "that we intended to leave Brussels to escape deportation, and that we would carry any message to King Albert they wanted to send. Lieutenant Transquet has some valuable military information, and we must be his messengers."

"Are we going to leave so soon, Bob?" Egmont asked anxiously. "Do you think it necessary?"

"Yes, before the next batch of boys is rounded up for deportation, and that may come soon. Ask Mr. —— our friend, the editor."

Appealed to for confirmation of Bob's words,

the man nodded, and said: "It is n't safe for either of you to stay another day in Brussels. If I had a boy of your age, I'd send him away at once. It is better to take the risk of escaping across the border than to remain here."

Egmont was silent and troubled. He was thinking of his grandfather, the aged Count d'Anethan. How would he take the news? Was it not a boy's duty to stay by the side of one so old and infirm in his great trials? He turned to his cousin.

"Will grandfather want us to leave him, Bob?" he asked. "He's alone, you know."

"He'd rather see us go of our own free will, with a chance of escaping, than to be dragged away from him to work in Germany," replied Bob, stoutly. "That would nearly kill him, Egmont."

"Yes, I suppose it would. He's been dreading it for a long time, and—and—yes, yes, of course, it's the right thing to do! We'll go and carry the message."

"Spoken like your grandfather!" murmured the editor. "Count d'Anethan would be the last

one to remain behind if he was strong enough to fight. And Belgium to-day needs all its fighters, young and old."

"How about me, Bob?" Guy, who had remained quiet, asked. "Can I go, too?"

"No," said Bob, smiling, "you're too young for the Germans to deport, and besides you're needed here, Guy. We shall depend upon you and Leo Beeckmann and the others to keep the Vigilantes active. We must n't let the work stop."

Guy sighed and looked longingly at the wounded lieutenant as if he was bemoaning the fact that he was so young. "I hate to stay behind," he murmured. "I'll miss you and Egmont, and—and—the adventures you'll meet."

Bob and his cousin laughed at the rueful expression of the speaker. "If you can't find adventures enough right here in Brussels," the former said, "I'd like to know where you'll find them. You might capture a Germany sentry if things get too tame for you, Guy."

"I would n't know what to do with him after I'd caught him," laughed the boy. "They're a nuisance, dead or alive."

"This old dungeon would hold a few of them," Egmont added. "Why not try to fill it with prisoners that you kidnap?"

"It would n't be a safe prison for them," interrupted the editor, catching the spirit of their remarks. "My men would n't do a bit of work for strafing them. No, you can't have my printing shop for a German prison."

Gustave, who had been listening and smiling, suddenly clapped his hands and exclaimed:

"It is like being home again to see the merry laugh and smile. It's so long since I've heard it. Nothing but cries and moans and tales of woe—nothing but sorrow and suffering! Ah, it is good for the heart! Let me embrace you, my boys! I am young again—a boy myself. I could sing and dance again."

Then, with his eyes shining and his hands beating time, he began humming the last stanza of the national hymn:

"O Belgique, ô Mère chérie,
A toi nos cœurs, à toi bras,
A toi notre sang, ô Patrie!
Nous le jurons tours, tu vivras!

Tu vivras toujours grande et belle,
 Et ton invincible unité
 Aura pour devise immortelle
 Le Roi, la Loi, la Liberté!"

Before they realized it the others were joining him, and from outside in the main room came an echo of the tune as the men at their work in getting out the paper took up the refrain.

CHAPTER XIV

PREPARING TO CROSS THE BORDER

THE military information that Lieutenant Transquet had gathered in Germany consisted of valuable details of the internal conditions in the Hun army and of their intended campaign against the Allies. The whole outline of their contemplated massing at different points had been pieced together by the Belgian patriot. It had been obtained from various sources in ways that only a professional spy, or one who had become familiar with the German methods through long residence in different internment camps, could pursue successfully.

In hiding by day, and listening at night; in robbing dead officers and soldiers of valuable papers; in secreting himself close to army headquarters at the risk of discovery, and by utilizing every scrap of information picked up from peasant and soldier, from the wounded and the pris-

oners, he had managed to form an accurate idea of many of their exact plans for coming offensive and defensive tactics.

For nearly two hours, he rehearsed these details to the three boys, going over and over again the most vital parts of his story and making his listeners repeat his words until even he felt satisfied they had thoroughly grasped the information. There were to be no written instructions to carry—nothing that the enemy could seize in the event of capture, but he drew small maps and made the boys study them, and then re-draw them from memory. At the conclusion of the interview there seemed no possibility of mistake in transmitting the message.

“I could repeat it word for word like a parrot,” Bob said, grinning, “and I could draw the maps in my sleep.”

“I’ll never forget them,” replied Egmont, more seriously. “I know them by heart as if engraved there.”

“I know them, too,” added Guy, “but what good does it do me? I can’t carry them to the Belgian army.”

"If Egmont and I are captured, Guy, you may have to," replied Bob. "We're not so sure we can get through."

"Well," sighed his cousin, "we'd better get back home now. Grandfather will be worried about us."

The boys took leave of their new friends in the subterranean dungeon and slowly made their way back to daylight. One of the men preceded them to make a thorough investigation of the ruins before they ventured forth. With the coast clear, the boys scrambled out of the tunnel and climbed over the walls of the château and from there made their way back to the woods.

It was then late in the afternoon. They had spent so many hours exploring the ruins and the dungeon that they had to hurry to reach home before dark.

As they trudged along, they once more took on the character of three idle, aimless boys who had been off on a day's tramp in the country. They avoided the German sentries as much as possible, and passed those they could not escape with apparent indifference. Once in the city,

they joined the throngs on the streets and boulevards, and made a quick run home.

On arriving at the Palais d'Anethan Bob and Egmont requested an interview with their grandfather, who received them in his library. The old count was feeble, but still held himself upright.

"Grandfather," Egmont began, affectionately embracing him, "Bob and I think we ought to leave Belgium. Several times we have been held up and threatened with deportation to Germany. It may come at any hour. Bob and I can't stay here in hiding until they search us out and drag us away. We'd rather be—be caught in trying to get away."

Count d'Anethan nodded his head silently. The suggestion did not surprise him. He had been expecting it, with fear and dread, but he did not flinch before the crisis.

"What have you planned to do?" he asked. "Make your way into Holland?"

"No, we want to join King Albert's army."

The eyes of the old man lighted up. "It's what I wanted to hear you say, Egmont," he

replied. "Our beloved king needs the service of every one of his subjects. I have given all to him except my two dear grandchildren. Now I willingly give them." The old count's figure straightened and his eyes flashed. "If I withheld them, I should hang my head in shame! No, I am happy that they have the spirit to wish to serve."

He laid a hand on the shoulder of each. "Go, my children, and acquit yourself worthily," he said solemnly. "Every day you are away from me I shall thank God that I am blessed with two such noble grandsons. If it is his will that you should make the ultimate sacrifice and that the last of the d'Anethans should expire on the field of battle, I shall glory in knowing they died in a supremely great cause. Go. Serve our God and our noble king! It is my last benediction!"

Egmont and Bob embraced him in silence, too much affected to speak.

Then they began to plan for their flight. Far into the night the momentous question was discussed. Finally, it was decided that they should

go as ragged urchins, dressed in their poorest, with only sufficient money and food to carry them over the first few days. After that they would have to depend upon their wits and own resources.

They studied the maps carefully, tracing not only the general course, but planned their different routes for each day. "With fair luck," Bob mused, as he pored over the map, "we should reach Ghent in a couple of nights. Henri Rogiers should meet us there. We ought to tell him of our plans. He can give us better directions about the roads on the other side of Ghent."

"Then where shall we go?" asked Egmont. "To Bruges?"

"No, that would be in the enemy's lines. We ought to strike nearly due west for Dixmude or Ypres by way of Deynze and Thielt."

"I don't care to follow the railroad too closely," murmured Egmont. "The open country is safer."

"I did n't mean to stick to the railroads," replied Bob, "but we've got to have some guide. We can keep a few miles back of the railroad,

but close enough to know we're going in the right direction."

Count d'Anethan and Guy helped them in their plans, advising and criticizing each move. The result was a compromise between several routes. They would start in the direction of Ghent, avoiding that city, but skirting close enough to it to get into communication with some of the Vigilantes living there. After that their route would depend largely upon the information they could get from Henri or any of his friends.

The start was to be made the following evening, the boys taking advantage of the darkness to slip out of Brussels and put a good many miles behind them before the light of another day. Between Brussels and Ghent, they would find a hiding-place in which to sleep and spend the day.

They could not leave until they had said good-bye to the Chokiers. Nothing had been heard of Charlotte and Jean since their escape, and they promised if they picked up any information on the way to have it transmitted back to them by the Boy Vigilantes. "Guy will get the news and

tell you," Bob promised. "It may take several days, but don't worry. Jean and Charlotte will get through. Every boy will help them."

Madame de Chokier bade them God-speed, embracing each in turn, while her husband like Count d'Anethan rested a hand lightly on their shoulders and said: "For God and your King! Belgium trusts you. I know you will prove worthy of her!"

The next day there were many little things the boys had to attend to before they left on their dangerous trip. They summoned as many of the Boy Vigilantes as they could reach, and imparted to them the information they had received from the sick lieutenant. Then they bade farewell to each one in turn.

"We may never see them again," Egmont murmured, as they made their way home. "It seems like leaving everything, to explore new worlds."

"You take it too seriously, cousin," replied Bob, smiling. "I'm sure we're going to come back, and with the Belgian army. On that day Brussels will be in holiday dress."

"Oh, yes, I want to be here then," Egmont

exclaimed eagerly, his hopes suddenly aroused.

They turned a corner and entered once more the familiar street on which they lived. It would perhaps be the last time they would play on it or see the sun set behind the gilded dome that rose like a watch-tower at the far end. A crowd had gathered in the middle of the block, and the two boys stopped to gaze at them.

"What is it?" asked Egmont.

"Don't know—an accident maybe—or an arrest."

"There's a lot of German soldiers. I can see their uniforms."

"Where can't you see them, for that matter?" queried Bob. "Oh, it's just some little disturbance! Come on home."

They proceeded rapidly, drawing nearer the crowd as they approached the Palais d'Anethan. Suddenly Bob stopped and stood stock-still. Egmont glanced up at him inquiringly.

"Look, cousin," he whispered, "they're arresting some one. Hear the cries of the people. It's another one of the outrages of the Huns. See the soldiers jostling the crowd."

"I wish I could do something," growled Egmont, his blood boiling. "Somebody arrested on a fake charge, I suppose. If I had a rifle—"

Bob clutched his arm and cut off his words. He was pointing with a trembling finger in the direction of the crowd. "They're rounding up another batch of boys to take to Germany!" he whispered hoarsely.

Egmont's face turned pale, and his hands trembled. The reason for the crowd was apparent to both of them. The soldiers were searching every house on the street, taking a census of boys old enough to work, and corralling them in a bunch on one side of the street. While a company of soldiers with fixed bayonets guarded them, an officer and three others were making a house-to-house visit. The cries of the people could be heard a block away.

Bob turned swiftly and glanced behind him. They could not reach their home without passing the searchers. To attempt it in the face of the mob would be foolhardy.

"We can't go on," he whispered. "We must

go back and hide somewhere until after dark. They may take us. They may be searching for us."

Egmont nodded his head, and whispered, "The Chokiers. We can go there."

"Yes, but we must hurry!"

They wheeled and started to retrace their footsteps, but to their surprise and horror they came face to face with another squad of soldiers, headed by a young officer. They had closed in behind them to guard that end of the street.

For a moment they were too bewildered to act, and the amount of time they lost in their hesitation gave the soldiers the opportunity to advance upon them. When he saw them coming, Bob grew desperate. "Run for the nearest entrance," he whispered, "and make for the roof!"

He started to put his own advice into execution, but the street suddenly seemed to be full of soldiers. Two darted out of the very doorway into which they were running, and two fixed bayonets met their charge. So impetuous had been their run that they plunged within a foot of the

point of the bayonets before they could check themselves. The soldiers growled a halt, and held them there.

At that moment a young officer came out of the doorway near which they stood. "Do you live here?" he demanded, looking sharply at them.

"No," replied Bob, facing the man unflinchingly.

"Then why in such a hurry to enter?" the man asked.

Neither Bob nor Egmont had a ready answer to this question. They could not give an explanation of their sudden eagerness to escape from the street.

"You live on this street, don't you?" continued their interrogator.

"Yes," Bob acknowledged.

The officer smiled and seemed well satisfied. "Then," he said, "you will please march over there and wait orders."

He pointed to the group of boys of about their own age huddled in the middle of the block, surrounded by a guard of soldiers.

"What have we done that you should arrest us?" Bob asked boldly, although his heart was beating with dread, for he knew the meaning of the whole proceeding. "We have done nothing. You can't arrest us."

The young officer smiled at him. "I asked you to step across the way and wait orders," he replied quietly. "I did n't say that you were under arrest."

"But I wish to go to my home," Bob objected. "You have no right to detain me if I have n't done anything wrong."

There was no direct reply to this. The officer spoke to the soldiers, and they immediately advanced with fixed bayonets. It was either a question of obeying the order or being prodded by the bayonets. Bob and Egmont chose the former, and sullenly crossed the street ahead of the two soldiers.

"They're going to deport us, Egmont," Bob whispered to his cousin. "They're rounding up all the boys of age in our street. We're caught on the eve of our leaving. Why did n't we go last night?"

"It may be they will let us off," replied Egmont. "We're under fourteen."

"Yes, and look fifteen!" was the scornful reply. "What do they care about our age if we're big enough to work for them. No, we're caught, and if we can't escape we're bound for a trip to Germany."

"Then we must escape, Bob! We must!" cried Egmont, in a fierce little voice. "I shall never go to Germany! If I do I shall refuse to work for them! I'll starve first!"

"I don't intend to go either, cousin," was the cool reply, "but just now we can't escape without being shot or bayoneted. We'll have to submit, and wait our chance."

"They'll give us a chance to see grandfather and say good-by to him, won't they?" asked Egmont, anxiously.

"No, I don't think so. That is n't their way. They'll drag us off at once. They don't like to be interfered with by parents and grandparents. Maybe it's just as well. It would only cause grandfather pain and sorrow to see us go. If he does n't see us he may think we got wind of

the round-up, and escaped before it was too late. Yes, we 'll let him think that. It 's easier for him. It might kill him if he saw us carried off to Germany."

"It would! I 'm sure it would!" replied Egmont, fervently. "We won't make any fuss now, but later—"

"Yes—later!"

Bob smiled grimly, but right down in his heart he was afraid that later would prove worse than the present.

CHAPTER XV

ON THE WAY TO GERMANY

THERE were nearly a score of boys surrounded by the guard of soldiers, some older and others younger than Bob and Egmont; but they were mostly strong, husky chaps, and not a few of them belonged to the Vigilantes. They recognized Bob and his cousin, and saw that they stood in the same peril as themselves. They apparently gave up all hope of release, becoming visibly depressed and down-hearted.

Bob was anxious to keep up their spirits. It was a part of the creed of his organization. Instead of showing the fear that clutched at his own heart, he smiled and nodded recognition of his companions as if the whole thing was in the nature of a lark.

When the soldiers were not looking, he whispered quietly to those nearest him. "Don't give

up hope, Vigilantes! Watch for a chance to escape. Don't take risks, but keep your eyes open. If the opportunity comes we'll all make a break for liberty together. Then scatter, and make your way to Holland or France. Don't more than two travel together. Hide in the day, and travel at night. Meanwhile, keep cheerful and watch for your chance."

These words of encouragement had an immediate effect on the prisoners, and gloomy faces suddenly brightened. When the last house of the street had been searched, and the last boy rounded up, the commander gave the order to march, and the procession moved forward.

It was a sad procession, and the populace lining both sides of the street wailed and moaned; but the prisoners looked quite cheerful and happy. They laughed and joked, and waved to their parents and friends.

"It's only a little vacation! We'll come back soon! We'll never go to Germany! Don't worry about us! We can take care of ourselves. Vive la Belgique!"

Then to the surprise of the soldiers, they broke

out into Belgium's national hymn, and the crowds following them caught the spirit and took up the refrain. The very echoes of the street were awakened by the inspiring voices as the beautiful hymn rolled defiantly from hundreds of throats.

The German officer looked annoyed. He bit his lip, and tried to suppress the singing, but he might just as well have tried to stop the waves of the ocean from beating on the shore. The more he shouted and threatened, the more vociferous the singing grew, and even when some of the soldiers charged on the crowd they simply fell back and shouted:

“Vive la Belgique!”

Finally, compelled to make the most of an unpleasant situation, the officer accepted the humiliation in silence and ordered the procession forward at quick step.

Their destination proved to be a fine old mansion which the Germans used for military headquarters and a temporary prison. A cordon of soldiers was thrown around it and the windows were barred by iron gratings, so escape was out of the question. The windows, too,

opened on a courtyard, where two sentries paced silently night and day, while a third guarded the entrance to it. All the prisoners were hustled into a large room, which had been the banquet-hall of the former owner, and were locked in. They were not overcrowded, so large was the room, but there were no beds or couches. The hard floor furnished all the sleeping accommodations they could expect.

When the door closed behind them, the spirit of defiance that had sustained the boys suddenly began to waver. Bob understood this. It was the natural reaction from their display of enthusiasm. Egmont drew his cousin to one of the windows and looked out.

"Not much chance of escaping now," he murmured in an undertone. "The windows are all barred."

"I had no intention of jumping from here," replied Bob coolly. "But our time will come later."

"When?"

Bob forced a laugh, and shrugged his shoulders. "We must n't talk of it now," he re-

plied. "I want to keep up the spirits of the others."

Bob turned and faced the prisoners.

"How many of you are Vigilantes?" he asked in a quiet voice. "Raise your hands."

About half of them responded. The others looked blank and puzzled. They had never heard of the Vigilantes.

"All right, Vigilantes," he said, addressing those who had raised their hands, "Now we're going to initiate every one here who will take the oath. Each Vigilante explain to his nearest companion what the organization is. Then all who want to join can come in. We must stand together, or we'll fall separately. Now, Egmont and Albert and Ernest, get busy!"

He led the way by seizing the arm of the nearest boy who had not raised a hand, and began telling him the history and meaning of the Vigilantes. The others followed his advice, and in a few moments the room was a buzz of whisperings. It was the greatest effort to recruit members they had ever dared undertake. Bob

reasoned rightly that fear would stifle any who might ordinarily protest or show the white feather. They were all in danger of being deported, and if they were to escape, it had to be done through organized effort.

At the end of half an hour Bob spoke to them all again, keeping his voice low so as not to attract the attention of the guard outside. "Now we'll take the oath," he said. "All who wish to join, raise their hands."

Up went hands from every side.

"Those who do not care to join raise their hands now," he added, after a pause.

Not a hand went up. Bob smiled with satisfaction.

"That's good! Now we understand one another. We're going to stick together and act as one when the moment comes. Now let each one step forward and take the oath separately."

It was not so impressive a ceremony as some they had witnessed, but it had an even deeper significance and solemnity that all the others lacked. Every face was serious. Bob, sur-

rounded by those who had already been admitted as members, made each applicant hold up his right hand and repeat the oath after him. Then, tapping him on the right shoulder, he pronounced the words:

"I greet you as a Boy Vigilante of Belgium. May you always prove true to your companions and to your country."

The other members in turn grasped the hands of each new comrade and gave him the secret grip. When this ceremony was over, Bob motioned for silence.

"Now listen carefully," he whispered. "No boy is to think of himself alone. We act together. If there's a chance to escape, we must pass the word around, and all must take advantage of it. If the opportunity comes to regain our liberty we must scatter immediately, and then make for the Holland or French border, alone or in couples."

He paused for a minute, and then asked: "How many know the way? Those who are not familiar with the different routes should learn about them from those who know them. If you

get lost, give the countersign, 'Vigilantes,' to any boy on the way. He may direct you."

There followed a long consultation and buzz of youthful voices as Egmont and Bob and the others who possessed the necessary information explained the different ways to reach the border.

"When shall we get away?" eagerly asked one of the new members of the organization.

"I don't know," replied Bob. "All depends upon the future. But if the time comes, I'll give the word. If I should whisper 'Vigilantes,' that will be the signal to break away—all at once!"

Now while Bob and Egmont had prepared the prisoners for general flight if the opportunity came, they both doubted very much if their work was not all in vain. Neither had any clear idea of any plan. Everything was vague and indefinite in their minds. Egmont in particular, was depressed and discouraged.

"Had we any right to encourage them, Bob?" he asked when they were alone in a corner of the room. "There is n't any chance of escaping."

"No, I'm afraid not," murmured his cousin, "but no harm is done in cheering them up. It will do them good."

Bob, despite his efforts to cheer his companions, was himself much depressed. He hardly slept a wink, and tossed restlessly on his hard bed. All through the night he lay awake, thinking of the dreadful situation they were facing, and trying in vain to plan some method of escaping before it was too late.

Meanwhile silence brooded over the sleeping city. No sounds disturbed the quiet except the footsteps of the sentries.

It was still dark when the guard opened the door and came in to awaken the prisoners. One by one they were aroused from the stupor of slumber. Why they should be disturbed in their sleep in the middle of the night was a mystery to them. But they had no choice except to obey the orders of their captors.

They were formed in line and then marched out into the open air, flanked on both sides by soldiers. Through the silent, deserted streets of Brussels they tramped, until their destination

suddenly dawned upon all. The Gare du Nord was directly ahead of them.

"They're going to put us on the train before it's light," Bob whispered in dismay.

"They don't want to let the people see us go."

"Oh!" gasped his cousin in dismay.

One by one the boys grasped the situation, and groans escaped their lips. They were to be deported under the cover of darkness. Before Brussels woke they would be well on their journey toward Germany. A few gritted their teeth in silence, and others started to protest; but the soldiers were in no pleasant mood. They prodded the first one that uttered a cry, and threatened the others.

"It's no use," Bob whispered. "Better submit in silence. If we go cheerfully it will throw them off their guard when the time comes."

They were halted before a box-car attached to the end of a long train, and ordered to enter it. The floor was strewn with musty straw, with no other signs of comfort visible. Bob once more set the example. He walked briskly across the gang-plank with Egmont close behind him. It

seemed that his boast that they could never deport him to Germany had been an idle one, and even Egmont began to lose faith in his leadership.

"We'll never get out of here until we're in Germany," the latter said ruefully, with a little reproach in his voice.

"I don't know, cousin. But there's always hope so long as there's life. I must finish my nap."

Half an hour later the train started with a jolt. Every prisoner jumped to his feet, and applied an eye to some crack or loophole in the sides of the car. They were anxious to get the last glimpse of their beloved city. Brussels was slowly fading away in the gray light of a new day.

As the train started, Bob threw himself down in a corner and pretended to sleep; but he could hardly force his eyes to close. Events had moved too swiftly for him. Although he would not admit it to the others, he felt discouraged and a little frightened. Once outside of Brussels, their chances of escaping would diminish rapidly. It would not take many hours before

they would cross the border and enter Germany.

The train was moving slowly, as if feeling its way cautiously through the semi-gloom of early morning. A heavy mist hung over the landscape, obscuring all objects more effectually than the darkness. Gradually the train increased its speed, and with it came a corresponding drop in Bob's hopes.

"Have you any plan, Bob?" Egmont whispered, crawling to his cousin's side.

"Plan! Oh, yes, lots of them! But what good are they when you're locked in a box-car like a lot of sheep?"

He spoke so bitterly that Egmont, instead of reproaching him, turned tender and sympathetic.

"Never mind," he whispered. "We'll hope for the best."

Bob gave his hand a grateful squeeze, and lapsed again into his silent brooding. The train stopped suddenly, and the heart of each boy fluttered with renewed hope; but it was quickly dispelled. The stop was apparently at a siding to let another train pass. Then it started again, and was soon rattling along so they could hear

nothing but the clanking of loose chains and coupling bars. The wheels squeaked as if rusty and in need of grease. They were running at least twenty miles an hour, thirty perhaps, which in a short time would leave Brussels far in the rear.

It was when their last hope seemed gone, and they were submitting to the inevitable, that a sudden grinding of brakes, followed by a series of violent joltings and a crash that knocked every one to his knees, half-stunned them.

Before they could recover their senses, the box-car began a queer, acrobatic feat: the forward end reared up in the air and attempted to climb over the flat-car in front. Then, as if unable to accomplish this, it lurched sideways, and hung in mid-air for a second before it whirled over and began a plunge into space.

It was a wreck! It flashed across their minds in an instant—and a railroad wreck is always a terrible thing! It meant death and suffering to many. Pinned in their box-car, what chance had they to escape!

The falling car came to a sudden stop a moment

later with a crash that smashed in the sides and wrecked the roof. Bob got a bad blow on one arm, but otherwise he was unhurt. He looked up and saw daylight over him—their prison had been miraculously opened for them! With a realization of what this meant, he sprang to his feet.

“Vigilantes!” he cried. “Now is the time! Scatter in all directions, and make for the border!”

At first his call was not answered, and a fearful shudder passed through him. Had they all been killed in the accident? A head was raised near him, then another and another. The prisoners had simply been stunned by the fall, and not killed.

“Quick, get out before the guards come!” Bob urged.

There was a simultaneous response to the call this time. Like rats escaping from a sinking ship, they crawled out of the ruins and disappeared in the darkness. Some limped, but none seemed so badly injured that he could not run. As the last boy disappeared, Bob jumped out, just

as the guards came running toward the rear of the train. There was no time to look for any of his companions. He simply ducked and ran for cover.

CHAPTER XVI

THE ESCAPE

THE accident had occurred on an embankment running through a swamp, and most of the cars had fallen to the bottom, where a small brook was so choked that its waters were already backing up and spreading in a miniature lake. As Bob sprang out of the derailed box-car he found himself after a few steps among the dark shadows of the swamp, which were made more impenetrable by the heavy mist. Pursuit was almost impossible.

The guards and trainmen were so shaken by the accident that in their excitement they gave little thought to their youthful prisoners until it was too late. When they hurried to what had been the rear end of the train, they found nothing but a demolished box-car with no one in it.

By that time all the boys were safely hiding in the depths of the swamp. Bob had pushed

steadily on, the fear of pursuit warning him not to rest or look around. A mile or more from the wreck, he stopped long enough to get his breath. The thickets were so dense that concealment was easy.

"I'm safe for the present," he murmured; "and I guess the others are, too. I wonder which way Egmont went."

He had been disappointed in not finding his cousin waiting for him when he left the wreck, but he remembered that the order had been to scatter if the opportunity came for escape. Perhaps one of the others had gone with Egmont, and the two would travel together toward the border. Bob hoped so, but nevertheless he felt a little lonely and wished his cousin had waited for him.

"They can't find us in this swamp," he mused, "not unless they have bloodhounds."

But Bob knew that the Germans could be very thorough in their search if they wanted to find escaped prisoners. And he began to doubt if it was the safest place, after all. "They will take it for granted we'll hide in the swamp," he

reasoned, "and look for us there first. The safest plan is to get out of it on the opposite side, and find other shelter."

When he had reached this conclusion, he cautiously resumed his journey, and by daybreak came out on the farther side of the swamp. A farm-house was a short distance away, and near by was a field of ripening grain. This seemed to offer him the safest refuge for the day that was upon him.

He began crawling through the waving field of grain, stopping to conceal his tracks every yard, and replacing the stalks he had knocked down. He could not be too careful in this respect, for any soldier sent to watch that side of the swamp would naturally look for tracks.

He made his way to the very center of the field, and there threw himself down to rest. He was both hungry and thirsty, with neither food nor drink to be had. His thirst had been slaked before he left the swamp brook behind him, but the long crawl through the field of grain had overheated him, and his lips were dry and parched again.

Fortunately, the young wheat had headed out enough to furnish some nourishment and Bob began eating the grains with genuine relish. They seemed partially to satisfy both his hunger and his thirst.

After a while he pulled his cap over his eyes to shield them from the sun, and fell asleep. His intention was to take a short nap, but nature was far more exhausted than he realized. He slept on and on. The sun rose to the noon meridian, but fanned by a gentle breeze, he was quite comfortable and was not awakened by the hot rays. The birds warbled and chirped above him, and a few inquisitive ones flew down close to him and shrilled loudly as if resenting his appearance in such a place.

Bob heard nothing of the common noises of the day; the crowing of a cock, the mellow lowing of a cow, the distant bark of a dog, and the shouts of farmers as they worked in their fields.

It was nearly sunset when he finally woke with a start, and sat up in bewildered surprise. It took him a long while to gather his scattered wits

and recall the series of events that had led up to his present situation.

"Oh, I remember now!" he exclaimed finally. "I'm near the swamp where the train was wrecked. Well, nobody's found me. And night's nearly here! I must put a good many miles behind me before morning."

He dropped back and stretched himself, and once more helped himself to a meal. When he had chewed enough wheat to satisfy his immediate hunger, he filled his pockets with the raw grain. By that time the sun was down, and twilight was spreading over the land. "I must begin the real trip to the front now," he said, rising to his feet. "I've got to skirt around Brussels to get on the other side of it. That will make the trip a few miles longer."

The train had carried him in the opposite direction from his destination, and he figured it would take the whole night to get around to where he and Egmont had expected to start on their trip to the western front. Taking the setting sun as his guide, and after that a particular star, which he located in the heavens, he began traveling

northwest, first skirting the swamp until he came out upon the railroad, and then crossing this he followed a small country road that led in the direction of Strombeek.

The train had been on the way to Louvain, and there was another railroad running to Malines which he would have to cross before he came to the canal. Once across both railroad and canal, he felt safer and reasonably sure of his direction. Bob was quite familiar with the country, for he had ridden over the roads many times in his grandfather's car, and even in the dark he recognized landmarks and signs.

He trudged along doggedly, making good time in the early part of the night, but as time wore on he began to grow faint and tired. He was desperately hungry despite the wheat he chewed on his way. Somewhere in the middle of the night, he rested and almost fell asleep by the roadside.

"I must n't do that," he said, checking himself. "I must keep awake until morning. Then I'll sleep all day long."

But the problem that was concerning him was

to find something to eat and then a safe hiding-place for the day. Each night this problem would face him anew, for as morning dawned he had to creep away and conceal himself.

"If I could find a barn, I might hide in it," he reflected. But the thought of stray dogs and chickens bothered him. They might give the alarm and lead to his detection. "No, I'd be safer in the woods," he added. But it was not always possible to find woods and swamps to hide in on his long journey, and in the end he decided to leave each morning's problem to solve itself. "What's the use of worrying about it!" he said, smiling, "I'll cross each bridge when I get to it."

Day was again breaking when he finally came to a farm-house off by itself. In the dusk of early dawn it had a pleasant, homelike look. It made Bob feel lonely and homesick. While the owner of it and his family had slept peacefully through the night, and would soon be rising to begin the day's work, he, like a criminal, had been traveling all through the dark hours and now had to slink away and hide from the light of the sun. It made him a bit peevish and cross.

"They'll have a warm breakfast, too," he muttered, "and I'll have nothing but raw wheat."

He placed a hand to his stomach. It was so empty that it seemed to cave in. His clothes were wet and muddy, and altogether he presented a forlorn appearance, and felt just as he looked. He was dog-tired, so weary that he could drop down in his tracks and stay there for hours.

"I can't sleep unless I have something to eat," he added. "I'm just about starving."

Unconsciously he approached nearer the farmhouse, hunger urging him on. No one seemed to be up yet. If the people knew how starved and tired he was, they would surely help him. Would it be risky to apply for food and a chance to sleep in the barn? No true Belgian would betray a boy who had escaped the clutches of the Germans.

Then another thought came to him. If he was assisted by the family, the Germans would punish them for harboring an escaped fugitive. Hundreds of Belgians had been imprisoned, and some shot, for this humane crime.

"No, I 'll not get anybody in trouble," he said resolutely, facing about to return to the woods across the field. "Some German spy might hear of it."

He had nearly reached the barn before his resolution had taken form in his mind, and without danger of discovery he could make a run for it and hide there until night. He was on the point of doing this when he was startled by a voice directly behind him, saying:

"What do you want here?"

Bob wheeled around ready to run if escape was possible. But the owner of the voice was not a German soldier, as he feared, but a poorly clad farmer-boy a year or two younger than himself.

"What do you want here?" the boy repeated, watching him closely.

Bob's face relaxed, and he tried to smile, but made rather a poor attempt at it.

"Nothing," he answered, shrugging his shoulders. "Can you tell me which direction to take for Strombeek?"

"Yes, you 'll find the road across the fields," the boy replied, pointing in the direction. Then

looking suspiciously at his torn and muddy clothes, he asked, "Have you been traveling all night?"

Bob nodded. "Yes, and I'm dead tired."

"It is n't far to Strombeek, if that's where you're going."

Bob laughed a little nervously. "I don't know whether I'm going there or not," he said unthinkingly. "The fact is, I don't think I've got strength enough. I believe I'll look around for a resting-place and sleep for a while."

The other's face broke into a smile. "I thought so," he said, wagging his head. "You were going to hide in the barn."

"Perhaps I was," replied Bob, good-naturedly. "But, I would leave everything as I found it."

He took a handful of the raw grain from his pocket and held it out in his palm. "See," he said, "this is my breakfast."

"You're hungry!" ejaculated the boy.

"Who is n't, in Belgium?" was the retort.

An expression of sadness swept across the other's face.

"Yes, I know," he replied. "But," his face

lighting up with sympathy, "maybe I can get some bread for you, and some fruit. Come in the barn and wait."

Bob was so grateful for this promised assistance that he grasped one of the boy's hands, and said:

"I don't want to take the food away from your mother if she needs it, but—I feel as if I was nearly starved."

"But first tell me one thing," the boy interrupted, holding his hand, "did you ever hear of the Boy Vigilantes?"

Bob's heart almost leaped into his mouth at this surprising question. He had never once thought to use the magic word that he had cautioned the other members to employ whenever they met a Belgian boy, and here one was challenging him.

"Vigilantes!" he exclaimed. "Are you one of them? Then—then—"

He gave the boy the secret grip, and nearly shouted for joy when it was returned. Here was an unexpected friend where he had least expected to find one.

"I thought you were one," the boy said.

"You're the third one that has passed this way. I gave them food, but they didn't stop here."

"The third one—" stammered Bob.

"Yes, they escaped from the smash-up on the railroad. They were being taken to Germany—"

The meaning of the boy's words suddenly dawned upon Bob. Others of the escaped prisoners had found their way to the farm-house, and the boy had lived up to his oath to render aid and comfort to all fellow Vigilantes. The organization which Bob had been instrumental in forming had thus once more been of value to those in need.

"Tell me about them," he urged. "What did they look like? Was one of them tall and dark, with blue eyes?"

"First come into the barn. I can tell you everything there. Somebody might see us, now that it's getting light."

Bob followed him, and for several minutes he forgot his weariness and hunger in listening to the boy's description of the different fugitives he had aided. In the midst of it Bob broke out

jubilantly; "That's my cousin, Egmont d' Anethan!"

"Count d' Anethan's grandson?" the boy asked, his eyes widening in surprise.

"Yes, and I'm another—his American grandson!" Bob laughed.

The boy was so impressed by having helped a member of a family so well-known in Belgium that he was unable to speak for a minute, and he was aroused from his stupor only when Bob added:

"I shall never forget this—neither will Egmont. When this war's over we'll meet you again if you'll tell me your name."

"Gaston Thaux."

"Well, Gaston, I'll owe you for a day's lodgings, and—and—"

"Oh, I forgot! You're hungry. I'll be back at once."

He bolted through the barn door leaving Bob alone to contemplate his good luck in finding a safe hiding-place and a breakfast.

CHAPTER XVII

CAUGHT IN A GERMAN TRAP

GASTON THAUX proved a good provider, and he watched with eager eyes as Bob stowed away a substantial breakfast. Then he left him, promising to return toward night with his supper.

When Bob awoke it was beginning to grow dark, and Gaston was standing over him.

"Why—have I slept all day?" Bob murmured, rubbing his eyes.

"Yes, it is night. Here's your supper."

While he ate this, Bob talked with Gaston, and learned much from him of the roads and by-paths across the country. He wished to avoid towns and villages, and Gaston mapped out a route by which he could go around Strombeek and reach Alost without loss of time.

"At Alost the *Boches* are on the lookout," the

boy warned. "They are many. Keep away from there."

Bob thanked him for all he had done for him, and promised to follow his directions. The boy accompanied him a few miles on his way to see that he understood the route. When the time came to separate, Bob turned to him.

"Gaston," he said, "I shall always remember you. Some day this cruel war will be over, and then the Boy Vigilantes of Belgium will have a great meeting. The world will know how much the boys of Belgium have done for their country. Back in America we have an organization called the Boy Scouts. They have never been called upon to face a crisis such as this, but if they ever are, they can't do more than our Vigilantes. I shall report to them when I get back to America what Belgian boys have done. They will be eager to hear about it, and send fraternal greetings."

"I should like to meet the Boy Scouts of America," replied Gaston eagerly. "Tell them Gaston loves his country, and is ready to die for it."

Bob turned and trudged on alone, keeping

strictly to the route described by his friend. It was not a dark night, and with the aid of the moon he made rapid progress, following the country roads and skirting the villages in short cuts across fields and woods.

The element of adventure made his progress somewhat exciting. At one time he stumbled upon a party of men approaching from the opposite direction, and barely had time to duck in the bushes to escape detection. At another place he nearly ran straight into a German sentry, stationed at a cross-roads. Once he lost his way, and nearly strayed into the heart of Strombeek, losing thereby nearly an hour in time.

He crossed a railroad leading north from Brussels, and then, with clear, open country ahead, he made more rapid progress.

The only thing lacking to make his journey full of interest and delight was the absence of Egmont. They had planned the trip across Belgium to the western front together, and their separation had been a sore disappointment. Still, the fact that his cousin has passed along the same route ahead of him brought some relief to Bob's mind, and he

pushed on steadily, hoping sooner or later to find Egmont.

When he crossed the second railroad, he came to a wood that offered him shelter for the coming day. It was getting well on toward morning, and he would have to be on the lookout for a hiding-place before it got light. Tramping through the woods to the opposite side, he found himself unexpectedly at the edge of a stream of water of considerable depth and some two hundred feet wide. Gaston had told him of this stream, and had warned him that it was too deep to wade across.

"I 'll have to swim it," he mused, sitting down on the bank.

He was both cold and tired, and the thought of finishing his night's work with a hard swim in the icy-cold water did not appeal to him. "I 'll wait until another night before crossing," he added, shivering at the very thought of plunging into the stream.

On the opposite embankment the wooded shore stretched back in a high bluff. There would be equally good hiding-places there. He glanced back of him, and then across once more.

“Egmont would go on,” he reasoned, “and I ought to do the same. It will be an hour yet before daylight.”

He rose from his seat and waded out into the stream. A few yards from the shore the water was up to his waist. After that the bottom dipped sharply downward. A few more steps would carry him over his head.

He splashed the water over his face and head, and then without warning, a sharp challenging command directly back of him sent the blood racing through his veins. He knew that guttural challenge—some German sentry had either seen him or heard his splashing.

Bob remained perfectly still, his eyes watching the shore back of him. A light flashed in the bushes, and again the challenge came. Had he been seen? Unable to answer this question, he ducked down and waited. The crashing of footsteps through the bushes told Bob that his enemy was approaching. In a few moments it would be too late to act. Either he had to surrender, or make a break for liberty at once.

Bob chose the latter course. Taking the chance

that the soldier had not seen him yet, but had been attracted by the noise he had made, he settled down in the water and began swimming silently toward midstream.

There was the danger that the clearer light on the surface of the river would expose him to view, and to lessen this he kept his head well down, submerging completely at times, and swimming under water. When he came to the surface after one of these prolonged dives, he was startled by a flash behind him and the crashing of a rifle. The bullet did not strike anywhere near him, but Bob immediately ducked again and swam under water until he could no longer hold his breath.

When he came to the surface, he found the opposite shore within a few yards of him. He had crossed the stream, and the shadows of the bank ahead were already shielding him from view.

But his escape from the sentry did not mean he was out of danger. The report of the rifle would, perhaps, summon help and arouse sentries on both sides of the river, so when his feet touched

bottom, Bob waded ashore with the utmost caution.

Everything was quiet on both sides of the stream, and Bob took fresh courage at his miraculous escape. He began wading shoreward faster, and had reached dry ground, when suddenly a German soldier stepped out of the bushes with fixed bayonet.

He was grinning at the little ruse he had practised. Apparently he had been watching the swimmer all the time, and instead of shooting at him had waited for his prisoner to walk into the trap he had set for him. Bob's heart gave a great bound, but in response to the command of the sentry his hands went up over his head in token of surrender.

It was a bitter situation for the boy. After all his efforts, he had run straight into the enemy's hands. He had not been so clever as he thought. The *Boches* had outwitted him. This thought angered and disgusted Bob, and the hot blood of mortification sprang into his cheeks.

He advanced silently toward the sentry who seemed to be alone on the edge of the stream.

If there were other German soldiers in the vicinity, they kept well in the background and very quiet. This, Bob knew, was an impossibility. The German soldiers are too companionable and too inclined to exult over a capture for another to remain quiet when a friend has scored a success.

It was not yet day, and the shadows obscured the opposite shore. Bob noted that the bushes were thick all around him, and back of them the big woods sloped up to the bluff. With half a chance he could get into the woods and hide until another night.

Discovering that his prisoner was a half-grown boy, the German sentry relaxed some of his vigilance. He grinned, and playfully prodded Bob in the ribs with the point of his bayonet. "Where you going in the dark?" he asked in German. "Swimming rivers at night is *verboden*."

Bob made no reply. To all appearances he was too frightened to speak. He certainly made a ludicrous appearance, with the water dripping from his wet clothes. He shivered, too, partly from the cold and partly from fear.

"Little river rat, ain't you?" the sentry added. "Very cold bathing at night."

He chuckled at his own words. His rifle came down to the ground, the butt of it resting on the soft earth. He raised a hand to wipe his forehead. Bob noticed that the hand holding the rifle had relaxed. A smart blow would knock it away. Could he do it, and then, before the soldier could recover his fallen weapon, escape into the bushes?

The thought had scarcely taken possession of the boy's mind before he put it into execution. Taking the soldier entirely by surprise, he swept one hand downward, and with a quick, violent push he sent the rifle spinning from its owner. The German made an ineffectual grab for it, missed it, and with an oath began searching for it in the darkness.

But by that time Bob was a dozen feet away racing for the shelter of the bushes with the speed and agility of a deer. He leaped the first clump of bushes, dodged around the next, and then began an amazing zigzag course through the others. The shot from the rifle, which he knew would come at any moment, had to be guarded against.

When it did come, breaking the stillness of the gray morning, Bob was nowhere near the place where the bullet plowed its way. He was far to the right. With more caution than speed, now, he wormed his way deeper into the thicket, hoping to gain the woods before the German could locate him.

Apparently the sentry was depending more upon luck in hitting his quarry than in spying him with his eyes, for he began shooting into the bushes at random, awakening the echoes of the place with his fusillade of shots. Bob, meanwhile, was safely climbing the bluff, and once in the big woods he kept the trunks of trees between him and the sentry.

There were scurrying footsteps along the river front, and the shouts of many soldiers who had been aroused by the alarm. With a safe distance between him and his pursuers, Bob now forgot all caution, and ran and dodged along recklessly. Time was important. He had to place a long distance between him and the river.

The men would naturally search the bushes on the river front first, wasting a lot of valuable

time. Driving his strength to the limit, he kept on until he had covered at least a couple of miles. Then suddenly the woods came to an end. Beyond stretched fertile fields with not a sign of a good hiding-place in sight.

"If I stay in the woods, they'll hunt me out before night," he reasoned. "And if I go on I'm sure to be seen."

He was placed in a quandary, and stood irresolute for several minutes. It was getting lighter every minute. The wood was not a safe place for him. The Germans would search every square foot of it before night, and unless he knew of some unusual hiding-place he was sure to be caught.

A hundred yards from the edge of the woods he saw a stone building. It looked like the ruins of an old house, and the big trees surrounding it cast deep shadows over it. Bob decided it might offer a safer hiding-place than the woods.

Looking around, to make sure no eyes were watching, he made a dash for it, crouching low and picking his way carefully. With a sigh of relief, he reached the nearest tree without mishap. He stood a moment under it to get his breath and

make observations. There was no one in sight.

But if there was no one following him from the woods, he was not so fortunate in other respects. The battered door of the stone house suddenly opened, and Bob, to his dismay and terror, saw a uniformed German soldier standing in the entrance, gazing in the direction of the woods. He made some remark, and was answered by another voice inside.

Bob trembled like a leaf, and crouched close to the big trunk of the tree. Nothing but this friendly shelter stood between him and capture. It seemed to his vivid imagination that his body trembled so that it shook the branches of the tree. He gulped and swallowed, for fear his presence had already been discovered.

Finally the waiting German muttered something under his breath, and strode out of the house, closing the door behind him. He walked straight for the woods, as if expecting to meet some one. Bob watched him until he was nearly out of sight.

Now was his time, before the soldier returned. But which way could he go? There was another

man in the house, and the first one had a full view of the open fields beyond. He could not cross them or return to the woods without exposing himself. In his quandary, Bob happened to glance upward. The great spreading branches of the tree behind which he stood were dense with foliage.

"It's my only hope," the boy breathed, as he measured the distance between the ground and the thick branches overhead.

He began climbing the trunk of the tree, working his way upward slowly and cautiously. Any unnecessary shaking of the tree might alarm the soldier inside the house. When he reached the first branch, he stopped to get breath and to listen. Evidently he had not been heard.

After that it was comparatively easy for him to climb from branch to branch, and when he reached the protection of the thicker leafage, he gave a sigh of relief. To make his concealment perfect, he climbed still higher, until there was a dense screen of leaves between him and the ground. Directly beneath him was the stone house, part of the roof of which had caved in.

Bob could see right through this into the interior.

The second German was sprawled out on a rude bed made of an army blanket spread over a bunch of straw. Apparently he had not yet finished his sleep, for he was snoring rhythmically. Bob could have dropped a stone on his upturned face, and the thought of the sleeper's astonishment at such a surprise amused him so that he smiled in spite of his weariness and fright.

CHAPTER XVIII

BROKEN BONDS

BOB, crouching among the branches of the tree where he could look directly down at the sleeping soldier, began to feel safer than at any time since he had escaped the sentry on the river front. The century-old tree had mammoth branches and thick foliage. No one from below could see him, while he had the advantage of peering through the interlacing boughs without uncovering his position.

After a while the German who had gone to the woods returned, and in a loud, noisy voice routed his sleeping companion from his bed. The old stone house was apparently occupied by the sentries who had that section of the country under surveillance. There were two of them to take turns in doing guard duty.

Bob watched them prepare their morning meal and eat it with great gusto. This recalled to the

boy that he was still waiting for his own breakfast, which, judging from the outlook, would be a long time in coming.

He was also extremely tired and weary, but the thought of falling asleep in the tree and losing his balance kept him wide awake. There was certainly no rest or sleep for him that day—not unless both of the soldiers left the house together.

The second sentry walked away to the woods, finally, and the first one took his turn resting. Bob watched him with anxious eyes. All sorts of schemes entered his head. Would it be safe to descend and make a run across the open fields? Or was the risk too great?

“No, I ’ll have to stay up here until dark,” he decided finally.

The prospect of clinging to his perch all day without food or sleep was not inviting. The drowsy feeling that crept over him had to be fought back with will power. His growing hunger and thirst helped him in the struggle to keep awake. One could n’t sleep peacefully with hunger gnawing at his stomach.

The minutes and hours passed slowly, and still the sentry below slept on, while his companion paced his beat near the edge of the woods. As the sun rose it grew hotter, making Bob's perch still more uncomfortable. Distant shouts in the woods, and, once or twice, the crash of a gun told him that the search was still in progress, and that the woods were being systematically beaten.

Bob settled himself in a crotch between two big limbs and tried to make himself as comfortable as possible. With a rope he might have tied himself to the tree, so that, if he dropped asleep, he could not fall to the ground; but he had nothing that would answer this purpose. With arms flung around the biggest limb, he did manage to forget himself for a few minutes. When he woke with a start, his head and body were sagging at a dangerous angle.

"I must n't do that again," he muttered, regaining his balance.

Toward noon there was a sudden commotion in the woods. A sharp fusillade of rifle-shots, followed by shouts and calls, indicated some-

thing unusual. Wondering what it could all mean, Bob waited and listened. A few minutes later tramping feet warned him that his enemies were approaching the house.

Concealed among the branches, he waited and listened. The guard on duty near the woods was returning, accompanied by others. Bob could not see them until they were almost directly beneath him.

Then his heart gave a bound, and he almost dropped out of the tree. Three German soldiers stood there, and in their midst was a prisoner. Bob gave one glance, and exclaimed under his breath:

“Egmont! They’ve caught him!”

His cousin was wet and muddy, with his clothes torn and his hands and face scratched with the briers and twigs of the woods. The shouts and rifle-reports were explained—in searching for Bob they had stumbled upon Egmont, who had been hiding in the woods also.

Bob had a bad half hour. He felt in a measure responsible for his cousin’s capture. If he had not been so careless in attracting the at-

tention of the sentry patrolling the opposite side of the river, the drag-net search of the woods that had caught Egmont would never have been made.

His cousin was silent and dejected. He appeared thoroughly discouraged, and Bob's heart went out in sympathy to him. To be caught after making such a successful escape was enough to depress any one.

Bob's next thought was of the others. Was the woods being used as a hiding-place for more of the Vigilantes, or had they scattered and spread over the country? He waited anxiously, expecting to hear more shots and the capture of other prisoners.

The soldiers took their young prisoner into the old building, where they proceeded to tie his hands and feet—they were not going to take any chances of his running away. The sleeping sentry, meanwhile, woke up and listened to the story of the capture.

The boy seemed to be too tired and exhausted to pay any attention to his captors. He dropped down on the floor and was soon either fast asleep or feigning slumber. Bob concluded that his

cousin was simply tired out and glad to rest—an opportunity that he envied him, for his own limbs and body were aching and his eyes were heavy from lack of sleep.

With their prisoner secured, the soldiers who had captured him left the building, the two sentries accompanying them half-way to the woods. Bob waited until they were at a safe distance, and then, breaking off a twig, he dropped it through the open roof. It fell close to his cousin's side, but Egmont did not even open his eyes. Another landed on his body, but with no better effect. A third and fourth followed with the same results; but the fifth landed directly on Egmont's nose. He woke with a start, sat upright, and looked stupidly around him.

Bob glanced in the direction of the woods. The soldiers were a considerable distance away. Leaning over, he whispered as loudly as he dared:

“Egmont!”

The prisoner glanced around him in astonishment, for he had recognized the voice; but he saw nothing except the blank walls.

"Look up, Egmont!" Bob said; "in the tree over your head."

The prisoner obeyed, but for a time could see nothing. Bob shook the branch gently to attract his attention.

"Bob!" burst from Egmont's lips.

"Yes, I'm here; but don't speak so loud."

"What are you doing up there?" asked his cousin.

"Hiding from the *Boches*. Are you hurt?"

"No, but I'm desperately tired. Traveled all night."

"So did I, but I don't dare fall asleep up here."

Egmont continued to stare as if he could hardly believe his senses. This American cousin of his was forever doing the strangest things and appearing in the most unexpected places.

"Have they searched you yet?" Bob whispered again.

"Yes," was the reply, "they took everything I had away from me."

"Then they won't be apt to search you again," said his cousin. "That will help."

Egmont could not see the point. What differ-

ence did it make whether the Germans searched his clothes the second time? He had nothing more to lose.

"Now listen, cousin," Bob continued, "I'm going to drop my penknife to you. Do you think you can get it and put it in your pocket? How much can you move your hands?"

Egmont showed him, and the result was promising. His hands were tied by the wrists, but the palms and fingers had free play.

"Watch it!" Bob called again. "I'm going to drop it near you."

Taking good aim, he landed the pocket-knife within a foot of his cousin. "Pick it up and put it in your pocket," he warned.

Egmont began wriggling his bound hands toward the knife until the tips of his fingers touched it. Then he grasped it and held it a moment. "Can you open it?" Bob asked, watching him cautiously from above.

When he saw his cousin unclasp the blade, and hold it up for him to view, he asked once more; "Can you cut the ropes with it, first the one around your legs, and then the one binding your

wrists? No, not now," he added when Egmont started to show him. "Wait until to-night when one of the soldiers is asleep, and the other is outside on guard. I'll tell you when the coast is safe. All I wanted to find out now is if you can free yourself."

"Yes, I'm sure I can do it," Egmont replied. "It's easy enough to cut the rope around my legs."

"Try the one on your wrists," Bob interrupted. "Put the handle of the knife in your mouth, and saw at it."

It was a simple operation. Egmont rehearsed it long enough to satisfy Bob that he could cut his way to freedom in a few moments.

The sentries were beginning to move toward the house again, and Bob said softly:

"Put it in your pocket, and pretend to sleep. The soldiers are coming. Listen carefully, Egmont. To-night, when the guard is off duty, he will go to sleep. You must then cut your way free. I'll watch the one outside. When he's at the end of his beat, I'll let you know; I'll drop a small stick down to you. When you feel

it or hear it, come outside as quickly as you can. I'll climb down and meet you. We can get a long distance away before they find you're gone, if we have any luck."

"All right, Bob. I understand."

"Then go to sleep again. The men are coming. Pleasant dreams to you. I wish I could get a snooze. I don't see how I'm going to cling to this branch all day and not fall asleep."

His cousin cast him a glance of sympathy, for he knew how he felt from his own weariness, and then, as the noise of the approaching soldiers reached his ears, he rolled over, and in a short time was actually asleep.

Bob watched him enviously, and then turned his eyes to the two men. They did not enter the house for some time, but remained outside, smoking and talking under the shade of the trees. They even prepared their midday meal here, heating it over a fire made of dry leaves and sticks. The savory odor of it floated upward and made Bob nearly frantic. Even the coffee, made mostly of acorns, had such an overpowering

deliciousness that he unconsciously sniffed the odor with greedy satisfaction.

The men on duty near the woods patrolled a considerable section. While one disappeared and remained gone for nearly half an hour, the other either spent his time resting at the stone house or wandered off in the woods or fields. Once both were gone for so long that Bob was half tempted to rouse Egmont and tell him to come out; but on second thought he concluded it was better to wait until after dark. In broad daylight they might be seen crossing the fields and chased or shot at.

It was the longest day Bob had ever experienced. He had to fight against man's two worst enemies—hunger and the lack of sleep. Either one alone was bad enough, but the two combined made his vigil almost unbearable. The quiet of the scene and the warmth of the air made the temptation to sleep all the greater.

Slowly the sun sank toward the western horizon, and when the lengthening shadows of the trees stretched across the fields he felt better. "In a short time I 'll get down and leave," he kept

repeating to himself. "I must keep my eyes open."

The sun finally set. The two soldiers had finished their supper, and once more they sat in front of the house, smoking and chatting. The moon rose and spread a white light around, and still the soldiers sat there. Bob grew impatient. Would they never separate?

He was growing more and more anxious, when one of the men rose and yawned. The other, after a few more puffs at his cigarette, got to his feet also. They stood a moment talking, and then one entered the building and the other started off on his patrol. Bob's heart beat with hope and anticipation.

He saw the one inside strike a match and hold it to Egmont's face. Then he inspected his bonds, and grunted with satisfaction. In a few minutes he was sprawled out upon the rude couch, and almost immediately he fell asleep. The sentry on guard was at the far end of his beat.

As soon as Bob felt sure he broke off and dropped a twig through the open roof. To make sure that it should attract Egmont's attention, he

dropped a second. Then he began swiftly and noiselessly descending the tree. If Egmont had heard the signal, he would be ready almost as soon as Bob reached the bottom.

When the boy reached the ground, his limbs were so cramped and trembling that he had to exercise them a few moments before he could go on. His legs were fairly numb from inaction.

Finally, he crept up to the door and listened. It was closed, and no sounds came from within. Even the snoring of the soldier had ceased—or could n't he hear it through the thick door? He waited impatiently for five minutes, and, as Egmont still failed to appear, he became anxious. Had anything happened to him? Had he found it impossible to free himself, after all?

His impatience increased as the time drew near for the sentry on guard to return. It was now or never. If Egmont was having any trouble, he must push in and help him. They could n't delay now. They had gone too far to retreat. The same opportunity might not offer itself again.

He raised a hand to push back the door, when



Egmont closed the door as softly as he had opened it

it began to move very softly. Bob stepped back. The crack widened, and when the door had opened half-way his cousin stepped cautiously out. Bob touched his arm and beckoned him to follow.

Egmont closed the door as softly as he had opened it, and then, catching Bob's hand, he stepped quietly away from his prison. Gaining the open fields, they sped across them without speaking a word. Their noiseless flight through the moonlight night was swift and sure.

Not until they had put at least a mile between them and the stone house did either utter a word. Then Bob slackened his pace and turned to his cousin.

"Luck was with us that time, Egmont," he said jubilantly. "I hope it will hold."

"It was more your brains and planning than luck," was the eager retort. "But what were you doing up that tree?"

"Looking for cherries," smiled Bob.

"Why, cherries don't grow on oak trees!" replied Egmont, seriously. "Did n't you know it was an oak?"

“Sure!” laughed Bob, amused by the other’s lack of humor. “But cherries or acorns are all the same when one is starving, and if I don’t find something to eat soon, I ’ll simply drop down and die!”

CHAPTER XIX

THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS

DESPITE Bob's intense weariness, they traveled steadily all that night, anxious to put as many miles as possible between them and their German captors before morning. An hour before dawn they concealed themselves in a wooded ravine. Bob almost instantly fell asleep, while Egmont started off on a foraging expedition for some food.

He returned shortly before sunrise with enough to satisfy both of them. At the risk of discovery, he had boldly applied at a farm-house for relief, and the good-natured farmer patriot helped him liberally from his own meager supply of bread, meat, fruit, and vegetables.

Both boys slept soundly all day, and when night came again, Bob was not only completely refreshed, but in the best of spirits and eager to

resume their journey. They passed south of Alost, which had been scathed and terrorized by the German army as it swept westward to the Belgian frontier in the early days of the war, and then directed their steps toward Deynze. In the low Flanders country, they had easier traveling. Fortunately it was not the rainy season, and the country roads and pathways were not wallowing in mud and water.

The farther away they got from Brussels, the less they had to fear. They were fugitives, liable to be arrested on sight, but the Germans here were not so alert in watching for the boys who had escaped from the wrecked train. Perhaps this relaxation was due to the belief of the Germans that the fugitives would either make for the Holland border or attempt to return to Brussels and keep in hiding.

Traveling with great caution, they averaged ten or more miles a night across country, sleeping in the daytime, and foraging for food as opportunity offered. Despite the warnings the German authorities had given the peasants against harboring spies and assisting refugees,

the boys never had their appeal for food or lodgings denied them. All Belgium, from the lowest to the highest, was linked in a secret bond of fraternity to help each other, and few there were who from selfish fear refused to succor any of their compatriots.

Their progress finally brought them to their real danger-point. The nearer they approached the battle-front of the contending armies, the more difficult and dangerous their journey became, German detachments appearing everywhere. The roads were crowded with trucks, ambulances, and marching infantry, and the air was humming with airplanes. The wastage of war appeared in deserted villages, fields and meadows trampled by many feet, whole towns ruined and abandoned. On the other hand, refugees from the war zone were constantly met—old men and women, with children tagging behind, streaming in endless procession back from the firing-line. Their presence helped to camouflage the flight of the young Vigilantes, for mingling with these throngs of homeless fugitives, Bob and Egmont found a certain protection. The Germans here

were too busy with their own affair of holding the line to waste too much time and energy in stopping and examining every barefooted boy.

They traveled south of Ghent, crossing the Scheldt and then the Lys several miles below that historic city. Even the pleasure of meeting Henri Rogiers and his young Vigilantes of Flanders had been given up in order to keep to a more direct route.

A few miles below Thourout, they were hiding in the ruins of an old dugout which had long since been abandoned by the Germans. They had reached the edge of the fighting-zone. Directly ahead, the distant boom of the big guns came to them on the morning breeze. They had traveled far; but the few miles of territory that still remained to be traversed bristled with dangerous pitfalls. How could they cross the German lines and get safely across No-Man's-Land?

Bob had been thinking and dreaming of this every night and day since they had left Brussels; but as no solution had come to his mind, he had kept pushing the unpleasant question forward, hoping that something would develop to show

them a way out. But they were squarely up against the problem now. They either had to go blindly forward, and trust to their wits and a measure of good luck, or accomplish their purpose by some ruse or trick.

"We might find a couple of dead German soldiers and disguise ourselves in their uniforms," Bob suggested after a long discussion of the problem.

"We could never do it," replied Egmont, shaking his head. "We're too young to pass for soldiers."

"If we're old enough to work in German mines and factories we ought to pass for soldiers in uniform," Bob answered.

"If we were caught we'd be shot as spies."

"Sure! But that is'n't much worse than spending a few years in Germany as prisoners."

Both were silent for a while. The problem seemed too big for them. If they went forward in the darkness of night, they would be challenged often, and it would not be an easy thing to pass the sentries. They were near the firing-line, and sentries were more alert than they

had been around Brussels. They both realized this, and the thought sobered them.

"We can't fail now that we've come so far," Bob remarked again after a long pause. "We must get through."

"Yes, it would be worse than ever to be caught now. But how are we going to escape it?"

Bob made no answer; he was vainly trying to think of some scheme. It was still early morning, and they had the whole day ahead of them for rest, but with the coming of the night they should be prepared to do something. A few more miles and they would reach the back lines of the German army running from Ypres southward. They were directly opposite the English and Belgian armies which held the line from there to the coast.

"If only we had an airship!" Bob said, smiling grimly, "we could fly across in no time."

"There's one for you now!" exclaimed Egmont, pointing skyward through the ruined roof of the abandoned dugout. "Why don't you hail it?"

"An Albatross, of course, with the Kaiser's

iron cross on it!" Bob muttered in disgust.

The big bombing-plane was sweeping swiftly across the flat, open country, and the boys watched it with interest. In their hiding-place the sharp eyes of the aviator aloft could not see them, and they craned their heads upward with impunity until the big bird vanished in the distance.

"Nothing but Taubes and Albatrosses!" growled Bob. "Where are the English and French planes?"

"If they knew we were here waiting for them," said Egmont, smiling, "they might come. Anyway I don't think we need expect them. They're too busy fighting to bother about two fugitive boys."

"If they knew the information we were trying to smuggle across to them, I guess they'd come and pick us up." Then, recalling one of the chief objects of their journey, he added a little anxiously: "We can't waste time here. We must make the effort to-night. If we don't our secret information may be too late to do any good."

"Yes," replied Egmont gravely, "we've got to take the risk of being captured or killed. There's no going back now."

"No, it's forward! Well, let's have a good sleep. We'll need all our wits to-night."

"Hope nobody will disturb us here while we're asleep."

"Not much danger of that. The place is deserted. There isn't anybody within miles of us. This was a part of the trenches at one time, I suppose."

"It may have been made by the English or Belgians first," added Egmont, slowly, "and then rebuilt by the Germans when they drove toward the coast."

"Anyway, English, Belgian, or German, it makes a good hiding-place. Nothing but rats to disturb us. Well, I'm going to turn in."

Egmont stretched his weary limbs and yawned, while Bob began softening his hard bed by hauling away jagged pieces of concrete. Suddenly the loud whirring of another airship overhead broke the stillness.

"Another Albatross!" growled Egmont, as if

the presence of the machine overhead annoyed him.

"No, it's a Taube," corrected Bob, glancing upward. "It is, isn't it?" he added in doubt, appealing to his cousin for confirmation of his words.

"Why—yes—no," was the stammering reply.

They watched the big airplane in silence, their eyes striving to make out the insignia painted on the under part of the fuselage.

It was an enormous machine, with a great spread of wing, and flying very low. Indeed, it appeared to be descending; and while the boys looked, it rapidly grew in size.

"It's going to land!" exclaimed Bob, suddenly, clutching his cousin by the arm.

The big plane was circling around like a great hawk watching for its prey. The pilot was apparently searching for a level space where he could land with safety. Directly in front of the abandoned dugout stretched a low, flat field.

"It looks as if he's going to land here," Bob whispered excitedly.

"Do you think he'll come in here if he lands?"

Egmont asked. "If so we 'd better burrow under the stones in this corner."

"Yes, we 'll do that if he comes here," replied Bob absently. "But I want to see him land. It 's the biggest plane I 've seen. And it 's not a Taube or an Albatross."

"It does n't matter what it is," observed Egmont, "so long as it 's a German machine."

"I 'm not so sure it is," replied Bob.

"What! You don't mean—"

"No, I don't mean anything," was the hasty interruption, "except that I did n't see any iron cross painted on it. Did you?"

"No-o—but—"

"It may be the newest bombing machine of the *Boches*, camouflaged to deceive the enemy. They 're playing all such tricks."

Egmont made no reply. He was watching the big plane gliding gently to the earth. "It 's stopping!" he exclaimed; "and there are two men in it!"

"It looks big enough to carry a dozen," said Bob, as he took in the mammoth spread of the wings.

The moment the plane came to a standstill on the ground, the pilot and his companion leaped out and began examining the wings and the struts supporting them. Bob watched them with narrowing eyes. They were perhaps a thousand feet away from the boys, but, even at that distance, something in the bearing of the men, and the cut of their uniform, excited him. He looked again, opening and closing his eyes to make sure he was not being deceived. Then in a whisper that vibrated with emotion, he said:

"Egmont, they 're not Germans!"

"Who are they, then?" gasped Egmont, in amazement.

"I don't know. But I 'm going to find out."

Bob made a motion as if to climb out of the dugout, but his cousin held him back with a hand.

"If they 're Germans disguised, Bob, we 'll be jumping from the frying-pan into the fire, as you call it."

"Yes, but sometimes the frying-pan 's so hot that the fire can't be any worse," was the grim

retort. "I'm going to risk finding out who they are."

"You can't creep upon them without being seen, Bob," his cousin warned him. "There's nothing to hide behind."

"Then I'll walk straight toward them—they'll be less likely to shoot at me."

"And find yourself surrendering to the *Boches*?"

Bob paused a moment and took another long look at the plane and its two young navigators. There was something in the jaunty appearance of the pilot's helmet that impressed him. It was not the clumsy head-gear commonly used by the German fliers.

"I believe they're English!" he breathed aloud. "Yes, I'm sure of it! Come, Egmont, it's our chance. We must speak to them before they leave. They will take our message to King Albert."

Egmont found himself dragged out of the dug-out by his impetuous cousin, and, before he realized it, he was running across the open space in the direction of the airship. Their unexpected

appearance created a sensation. The two air-men gave a start when they saw them and sprang for their seats in the fuselage.

Bob, afraid they would fly away before he could reach them, waved his arms frantically over his head, and shouted:

“We ’re friends! Don’t go! Wait! I ’m an American! Oh, please don’t go!”

This latter was delivered in a long-drawn-out wail, for the big propellers of the bombing-machine had started and were clattering vociferously. The machine began to move. Then the engine stopped and the whirring propellers slowly came to a stop again. The young aviators turned upon the boys and covered them with their revolvers, and Bob immediately stopped and threw up his hands.

“We ’re friends!” he repeated. “I ’m an American, and my cousin is a Belgian. You ’re English, I know. We ’ve got important information for the Allies. If we can’t get across, won’t you take it for us?”

The aviators, experienced in the tricks and ruses of the enemy, kept silent for a moment, with

eyes bent more upon the ruined dugout than upon the two ragged boys, as if they expected any moment to see German soldiers emerge from it. But nothing happened, and finally one of them said in good English:

“Advance, but keep your hands above your heads!”

CHAPTER XX

PASSING THE ENEMY'S LINES

BOB and Egmont walked slowly forward, holding their hands above their heads, but there was neither fear nor doubt in their minds. They were jubilant and greatly excited, for they knew the aviators were English and not Germans in disguise. The men could hardly conceal their accent so well if they were of Teutonic origin, no matter how successfully they could camouflage their dress and big bombing-plane.

At a sharp command, they halted within ten feet of the aviators, one of whom kept his eyes constantly on the ruined dugout, while the other began interrogating them.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" he queried.

"I 'm Robert Lane, an American," replied Bob, speaking eagerly, "and this is my cousin, Egmont

d'Anethan. We're the grandsons of Count d'Anethan of Brussels. You may have heard of him."

"Can't say that I have. Don't know the Belgian nobility. Never had the pleasure of meeting any of them. But what are you doing here, and why 'd you try to hold us up?"

"We are trying to escape through the German lines to carry an important message to King Albert," was the prompt reply.

"What sort of message is it?" queried the pilot of the big airship.

"I'll tell you, though it's a long story," replied Bob; and he began a rapid history of the Boy Vigilantes, the men listening closely, as if to detect any flaw in the recital. When he came to Lieutenant Transquet's message they pricked up their ears.

"Eh! What's that? Repeat it!" one of them interrupted.

Bob obediently complied. The military information seemed to affect the aviators more than it had Bob or Egmont. They showed unusual interest, and became quite excited. Finally, the

one who had first spoken frowned, and asked sharply:

"Who helped you make that up?"

Bob flushed angrily.

"It is n't made up," he retorted. "I've repeated it to you exactly as Lieutenant Transquet told us."

The man turned to his companion and mumbled a few words in an undertone. Then he came back at Bob. "Who's in that dugout with you?" he demanded suddenly.

"Nobody. We were hiding there alone."

Again the Englishman consulted. There was still doubt in their minds. "You expect us to believe that cock and bull story?" asked the pilot, severely.

"I don't know whether you believe it or not," replied Bob, quickly, "but it's true."

The boy's evidently honest resentment seemed to be taken in good part, for the man smiled.

"Of course! Of course!" he murmured. "But we don't know Lieutenant Transquet. He may be a fraud, or one of the clever spies of Germany. We never heard of him. That

may not be his real name. Such a man may not exist."

"You can easily prove that," Bob answered, somewhat mollified. "Carry the message to King Albert. He'll know who Lieutenant Transquet is."

The aviators looked at each other and nodded their heads. "It's worth trying," said one.

"All right," responded the other. He turned to Bob and looked as severe and threatening as he could. "Of course, you know what happens to a spy when caught," he began. "We generally set him up before a firing squad."

Bob nodded and gulped once or twice.

"Now if this message you're giving us is made up you'll be shot," continued the speaker. "There won't be much trial either. Don't think you can deceive headquarters. They've got eyes that can see through a stone wall. They'll give you one chance, and then—if you're lying—you'll never have a chance to tell another. You understand that?"

"Yes," nodded Bob, a little puzzled by the man's words and threats. "But—"

The speaker interrupted him with a wave of the hand. "We 're not going to carry your message," he announced, "but we 're going to give you a chance to prove your words."

"How?" exclaimed Bob, weakly.

"Ever had a chance to fly?" queried the pilot. "If not, you 're going to have it now. You 're going along with us."

"You mean we 're going to cross the lines in that?" stammered Bob, pointing at the plane.

"Yes," nodded the aviator, "we 're going to take you to Belgian Headquarters, where you can repeat your story. Then, if they think you 're not telling the truth, they 'll shoot you, but if you are—well, they won't shoot you."

"Climb in," continued the aviator. "Lucky we did n't bring our photographer and bomber along, or there would n't be any room for you. Better hurry and get aboard before some of the *Boches* spot us. They must have seen us drop down, and they 'll be investigating soon. Fritz is a very inquisitive person."

"You 'll take us?" stammered Bob.

"That 's what I said! You want to back out

now? Afraid to repeat that story to headquarters?"

"No, sir, we want to go," replied Bob, stoutly; "and we 'd like to tell our story to King Albert."

"All right then. We 'll give you the chance. Climb up and get in the back seats."

Neither of the boys had ever been in an airship before, and as they climbed aboard they betrayed their ignorance in every act and look. The pilot and observer took their seats in front, and indicated the two back seats for the boys.

"Now strap yourselves in and hold your breath," one of them said, smiling. "We may have to play some tricks in the air to escape the guns of the *Boches*."

A few minutes later the engines were started, and the roar and the clatter were deafening. The mammoth, birdlike machine ran smoothly across the open space for a few hundred feet, and then, leaving the earth, began to rise swiftly into the air. Bob and Egmont clutched each other's hands.

Two hundred—three hundred feet the machine mounted, and then, taking a wide sweep, it

pointed its nose upwards and began climbing rapidly. It seemed to the boys as if they would be tipped out and spilled behind. The machine was spiraling and mounting in a wide sweep, making no pretence whatever to go toward the enemy's lines. Indeed, it seemed at times as if they were flying back into Belgium instead of toward the coast.

But this was merely a precaution to avoid the enemy's guns at a low altitude. A thousand feet, two, three, five, they mounted. The relief-map of Belgium seemed spread below them. Rivers became mere ribbons of silver; towns and cities were blurred, irregular spots.

Still they climbed upward, until the panorama below faded more and more into a strange puzzle, in which nothing could be distinguished.

The exhilaration of the flight at first kept the boys quiet; but when they saw how swiftly and safely they swept along, their tongues became loosened.

"It's great, is n't it?" exclaimed Bob.

"I wonder how high up we are," said Egmont.

"We must be miles and miles."

"Where are the German lines? They must be off there."

They talked on and on, exclamations of wonder and delight escaping their lips, but it never dawned upon either for some time that his conversation was a monologue, and that neither could hear the other above the clattering roar of the engines and propellers. When he realized this, Bob smiled a little sheepishly at his cousin and lapsed into silence.

Then a puff of smoke suddenly broke loose below, and a few moments later there was an explosion in the air near them that made the huge machine rock and sway. Another and another followed, until the air seemed filled with mighty concussions. The German anti-craft guns were saluting them as they attempted to cross the lines.

The only response the pilot made was to climb a little higher. Fragments of shells fell around them, and one pierced the upper right-hand plane.

For a moment they were in the very vortex of the storm of bursting shells. The enemy gunners had got the range. The pilot coolly directed his machine upward, climbing at such a sharp angle

that only the tail of it was presented as a target to those below.

In a few more minutes they would be beyond the reach of the shells. It was a fragment from the last one to explode near them that caught Bob on the left arm. He felt a sharp blow and a peculiar, stinging pain. He glanced around to see if his cousin had touched him to attract his attention; but Egmont was staring straight ahead.

A little surprised, he glanced down at his arm and saw that he had been wounded.

Until then Bob did not know it. It seemed a mystery to him, and he jerked his arm around to see where the blood came from. He had always supposed that a fragment from a shell caused exquisite pain, and here he had been wounded without actually being sure of it until he saw the blood.

"A bullet must have grazed it," he reasoned, "and made a little flesh-wound. I won't say anything until we land."

He wiped the blood on his hand across the sleeve of his torn jacket and turned his attention to the beauty of the scene below. They were

boring through the air at a speed of a hundred miles an hour. The force of the wind was tremendous, and one had to hold his mouth shut to keep the breath in.

Faster and faster they swept along. They were no longer climbing, and the exploding shells had been left far in the rear. The pain in his arm increased, but Bob murmured to himself, "We'll soon land. I don't want to bother them."

So he pressed his lips together and remained quiet. A strange, dizzy sensation crept over him. He fought it back manfully and gritted his teeth the harder. He had a dreamy sensation that they were falling. Certainly the earth was coming nearer; he could make out houses and trees now, and some soldiers below, marching.

There was a light shock, a series of jolts, and then a peculiar swaying and swinging of the machine. They came to a stop, and Bob was aroused by the voice of the pilot.

"Well, we're here! Jump out now, boys!"

Egmont quickly disengaged himself and climbed to the ground, but Bob felt the sudden

loss of all power of action. He sat there without moving.

"I say, can't you get out?" called the pilot, a little impatiently.

Bob nodded, but made no other movement. Suddenly the aviator caught sight of his pale face and his blood-stained sleeve.

"What 's the matter?" he asked. "I say, now, you were n't hit by one of those shells, were you? Why did n't you say so before? Well, you 're a plucky lad! Here!" he shouted to one of the soldiers coming up; "get a stretcher. I 've got a wounded boy aboard."

Bob did not entirely lose consciousness, for he knew in a vague way all that happened. But it was all so much like a dream! He was lifted from the seat and carried to a stretcher. Then two soldiers picked him up and took him into a big tent. A kindly face bent over him, and while the owner of it smiled at him, the hands skilfully removed his sleeve. A few moments later, the stranger nodded and said:

"Nothing serious—just a slight shell-wound. But he 's lost a lot of blood."

After that Bob slept. Whether it was from weakness and exhaustion, or as the result of a white pill the surgeon made him swallow, he could not say. When he opened his eyes again, Egmont was standing by his cot.

"How do you feel, Bob?" he asked anxiously.

"Why, I'm all right. Have I been asleep?"

"I should say so—for hours! I did n't think you'd ever wake up. Does your arm hurt you?"

"My arm? Oh, I was wounded! Yes, I'd forgotten that. It does n't hurt now."

Nevertheless, when he attempted to move it, he winced and made a wry face. But he forced a smile, and asked: "Where are we, Egmont? We got across, did n't we?"

"Yes," replied his cousin. "We're with the Belgian army behind the allied lines. I've delivered our message to King Albert. He saw me at once. I could n't wait for you, Bob. I thought it was too important to keep. You don't mind, do you?"

"No, of course not. That's what we came for—to deliver the message at once. I'm glad you could do it."

He sighed and turned wearily upon his couch.

"Of course, I told him all about you," Egmont added, "and how you had organized the Boy Vigilantes. He was so interested that he 's coming to see you. He 'll be here soon."

"Who? King Albert?"

"Yes," nodded Egmont, smiling; "don't you want to see him?"

"Why, not here—not like this! I—I—why did n't you tell him to wait until I was well, and—and—"

"You can't tell a king to wait, Bob," was the smiling reply. "He comes when he wants to. Listen! I believe he 's here now. Yes, he 's coming. You must get ready to receive him."

Egmont's excited voice betrayed his own agitation, and while he began hastily arranging the blanket and sheet of the cot, to make the patient more presentable to His Majesty, Bob drew himself up in bed, squared his shoulders, and said:

"All right! I 'm ready to receive the King. Show him in!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE ORDER OF LEOPOLD

THE King was a tall, fine, soldierly-looking man, dressed in simple military uniform, which showed the effect of hard service and wear, and holding in one hand the cap that he had removed upon entering. Bob had never seen His Majesty; but his many pictures exhibited in Brussels before the war had made his features familiar to him. But the original was different now from any of his photographs. The face was finer and nobler, the features showed lines of anxiety and suffering, and the eyes were gentle and sad, with an expression of infinite pathos and sympathy shining in them.

Accompanying the king were several of his aides and staff-officers. When he stepped into the tent, and saw the young patient watching him with wondering eyes, a smile of incredible gentleness illumined his whole face. His right hand went to his head in a military salute.

"Vigilante, I salute you in the name of Belgium!" he said gravely.

Bob responded with an awkward attempt to imitate the salute. "Thanks, Your Majesty!" he said faintly.

The officers of the staff also saluted, and stood at attention, while the King advanced to Bob's side and laid a hand gently on his head.

"My boy," he said earnestly, "I have heard all about your Vigilantes, first, from Jean de Chokier and his sister, who reached here safely a few days ago."

"Oh!" exclaimed Bob, forgetting in his relief that he was interrupting a real king. "Jean and Charlotte escaped then! I'm so glad. I must get word back to Madame de Chokier. I promised her I'd let her know as soon as I could."

The king smiled instead of resenting this interruption. "You won't have to worry about that," he replied. "Word has already gone back to them by the Vigilantes."

"Egmont sent it," Bob added. "It was like him to think of it while I was lying here."

"Yes, your cousin helped. He told us the pass-

word, and one of our scouts carried it through the lines. The first boy he met proved to be a Vigilante."

"There are lots of them in Belgium," Bob answered eagerly. "I think in time we'll have every boy enrolled. They're all patriotic, Your Majesty, and ready to do anything for their country."

"Yes, I know it," replied the king, a little moisture in his eyes. "No king was ever blessed by such a noble people, and now their children are following in their footsteps. Belgium is greater and finer to-day in her sorrow than in her days of peace."

Bob nodded, not at all abashed by the presence of the king whose heart had been so cruelly wrung by the desolation that had swept over his country. To him, the king was a noble leader, but one whose simple ways were like those of any other man.

"For your patriotic services in organizing the Boy Vigilantes, my young hero," began the king after a pause, "I decorate you with the *Order of Leopold*, although when your cousin, the grand-

son of Count d'Anethan, delivered Lieutenant Transquet's message, a message of great importance, I felt how utterly inadequate was any decoration I could bestow. My brave people and soldiers have made any honors I can give them seem hollow and empty. They have risen to the supreme test of sacrifice."

Bob watched the king's face and eyes, both so full of expression, that he scarcely noticed the ribboned cross that he held in his hand. Then a smile broke out on the king's face. He leaned forward, and said:

"I wanted the honor of pinning this to your coat before you left the hospital. It is the badge of merit for the hero."

Bob caught a glimpse of the piece of the ribbon in the Belgian colors, and the cross of white and gold, wreathed in green, dangling from it. The king was decorating him with the *Order of Leopold*, one of the highest honors conferred upon the brave and worthy. Many others in the army and out of it had received the decoration during the war, but never before had it been bestowed upon an American youth.

For the first time Bob felt a little awed in the presence of the brave king, whom a whole nation loved and worshiped in his exile more than when he had ruled in prosperity in his own capital. A little overcome by the simple, but impressive, ceremony, he submitted in silence. His coat was ragged and worn, and stained with the mud of the fields; his shirt showing underneath was not much better; but the splendid decoration could not have had a better setting to show off its beauty. It was the badge of courage which clothes could not dim.

The king rose and shook Bob's hand. Then he turned slowly and looked at Egmont. The same winning smile parted his lips and showed his white teeth.

"My only regret is that Count d'Anethan is n't here to-day to see his grandsons decorated," he added. "The American blood in one has n't eclipsed the Belgian blood in the other. Egmont d'Anethan, step forward!"

Egmont mechanically obeyed, exhibiting an agitation that Bob secretly enjoyed. When the



The King pinned a similar decoration on Egmont's coat

king pinned a similar decoration on his cousin's coat, he with difficulty restrained a shout of happiness. Egmont took the hand that His Majesty extended, trembling from head to foot as he did so. Before he could recover his presence of mind, the king said a few words of farewell to both of them, and departed.

Left alone in the tent, the two boys were quiet for a moment. Then Bob sat up and grinned.

"Say, cousin, that was great, was n't it?" he exclaimed. "Decorated by the king! Back in America the people would open their eyes and say I was lucky. I guess I am, too—lucky to get out of the clutches of the *Boches*. We might have been in Germany by this time, working in one of their mines."

Egmont nodded his head, shuddering a little at the thought of what they had escaped. Even the decoration on his coat could not entirely make him forget the fear that had been his.

"I wish Grandfather were here, Bob," he murmured. "How proud he would be!"

"Yes, so do I—and—and—Mother. I wonder

where she is. I have n't heard from her for so long that—that I'm worried about her. Do you think anything's happened to her?"

"Why, no!" replied Egmont. "Her last letter was from America, was n't it? And the *Boches* have n't got there yet!"

"I should say not!" snorted Bob. "And they never will get there except as prisoners of war. They'll have their hands full defending their own country when the American soldiers get over here in force."

"They are here in force, Bob—over a million of them," said Egmont, proudly. "I've seen some of them—and their flag!"

"What! They're here with the Belgians! The Stars and Stripes waving here in Belgium! Then I must get well! I can't lie here! I must get up and salute the dear old flag. Hurrah for Old Glory!"

Egmont smiled at Bob's enthusiasm, which even his wound could not quench. "They're not exactly here," his cousin explained, "that is, not the army. I saw some of their officers with King Albert. The soldiers are brigaded with the

English and Belgians a few miles away. When you get well you can go over and see them."

"I'll be all right in a day or two. It will seem like getting back home when I see the old flag flying in the breeze."

But his wish was not to be gratified quite so expeditiously as he expected. His wound, while not dangerous, was painful, and by night he was in a high fever. For twenty-four hours he was unconscious of all that was going on around him, in his delirium talking ramblingly of many things, while Egmont watched by his side, anxious and restless. The Belgian surgeon shook his head as he listened, and said: "He's English. I do not understand all his talk. He should have an English surgeon."

"No, he's an American," Egmont explained. Then a happy thought came to him. Bob was anxious to see the American uniform and his dearly beloved flag. Could it not be arranged so that, when he opened his eyes again, he would gaze upon them?

"Is there no American doctor here?" Egmont asked.

"American doctor? Let me see. Oh, yes, there is one, a great doctor from America. He's at the head of the American hospital at Furnes. I shall speak to him."

When the American doctor came, in response to the Belgian surgeon's request, Egmont explained the circumstances of his cousin's nationality and the adventures he had been through. He pointed to the decoration King Albert had pinned on his breast, and added wistfully:

"It would be such a pleasant surprise to him when he comes to himself to see the American flag and uniform before his eyes. I think it would do him more good than medicine."

"Yes, that and a good nurse would soon pull him through—an American nurse at that, one who can talk to him about home. By the way, what did you say his name was?"

"Robert Lane."

"Lane! Lane! That's curious," murmured the American doctor. "The nurse I was thinking of sending to him from the hospital is named Lane—a Mrs. Lane."

"From America?" asked Egmont, in surprise.

"Yes, all of the nurses in the American hospital are from the United States."

"You don't think it can be—be Bob's mother, do you?" stammered Egmont.

"Why—er—I don't know. I hardly believe it can be. Lane is a common name in America. Still—well, I 'll send for her."

For six hours Egmont waited in feverish impatience for the nurse that was to bring a little touch of America to the hospital tent where Bob still lay in delirious fever. When the motor-car stopped in front of the tent, Egmont peered through the flap, and then, in an ecstasy of joy, ran out into the arms of the nurse.

"Oh, it's you, Aunt Mary!" he shouted. "I knew it was! It could n't be anybody else! The moment the doctor said his nurse had your name, I knew it was you. What a surprise it will be for Bob."

"How is my dear boy, Egmont?" asked Mrs. Lane, in a trembling voice. "I could n't get here quick enough when the doctor said his name was Robert. Oh, I'm longing to take him in my arms. It's been so long since I've seen him!"

Egmont pulled her into the tent. She tiptoed very softly toward the couch and gently kissed the forehead of the restless patient. The kiss seemed to quiet him, for he lay still for a few moments. Then as her cool hands brushed his forehead it seemed to quiet the throbbing of his temples, for he gave a long sigh, his incoherent mutterings gradually ceased, and he fell into a natural sleep. A tear of gratitude fell from her eyes and rolled slowly down her cheek.

Two hours later Bob opened his eyes wearily, the fever gone.

"Egmont," he murmured.

Then his eyes looked into a face, bending close to his, that sent a thrill through his whole body. He opened them wider, and stretched forth a hand.

"Mother, is that you, or am I dreaming?" he murmured.

"No, you 're not dreaming, dear," was the gentle reply. "I 've come all the way from America, and I 'm here to nurse you."

"How did you know I needed you! How did

you get here so soon! Have I been sick long? It seemed only yesterday—”

“Never mind, dear. Don’t ask questions until you ’re stronger. I ’m here, and that ’s enough.”

“Yes, that ’s enough,” was the contented reply. The eyes closed, a sigh of relief escaped the lips, and both hands clutched one of his mother’s as if they would never let it go again.

Through the toil and tumult of the war, Bob had come safely, to find the one he loved the most waiting for him at the end of his journey. His dreams were pleasant dreams, full of visions of the future in which there were no wars, no rumors of war, but universal peace and content. America had certainly responded to the call of Belgium, the mothers as well as the sons, and during his waking moments Bob felt sure that the days of misery and suffering for the enslaved people would soon be over—for America fought only in a righteous cause, and once she had drawn the sword it would never be sheathed again until the wrongs of the brave little nation had been righted.

THE END

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